# THE GOODLY FELLOWSHIP OF THE PROPHETS

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HODDER AND STOUGHTON

# THE GOODLY FELLOWSHIP OF THE PROPHETS

A HOMILETIC STUDY OF THE PROPHETIC LITERATURE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT BY THE

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# PREFACE

THE encouraging reception given to the Author's previous studies of the Apostles —*The Men Whom Jesus Made*—has led to this companion volume on the "literary" prophets of the Old Testament. The richness of the material involved has, however, made the task of setting forth the character and teaching of these great personalities, in one lecture, a much more difficult one. In some cases, indeed, we have been constrained to extend these studies to more than one lecture; and in most we have been able only to set forth some of the great conceptions for which these prophets stood. We hope, however, that the attempt to give a plain and practical account of the main ideals of these preachers of the past, in the light of the needs of to-day, will be helpful at least to preachers and teachers of our own time, in their effort to expound this fascinating but difficult portion of the Old Testament.

As the aim is always practical, critical questions, while never overlooked, have only been touched

upon where they were necessary to expound the ideas of the personalities involved. With but one exception, "Isaiah's Messianic Hope," these studies were all preached and their sermonic form has been intentionally preserved.

We would only add that, as the subject was the "literary" prophets, we have not included the books of Jonah or Daniel in this series. Whatever view may be taken of these, their heroes are essentially men of action, rather than men of thought.

W. MACKINTOSH MACKAY.

SHERBROOKE CHURCH,
GLASGOW,
*July*, 1929.

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| Hosea | . . . | „ „ | „ 740 B.C. |
| Micah | . . . | „ „ | „ 740 B.C. |
| Isaiah | . . . | „ „ | from 725 to 690 B.C. |
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| Malachi | . . . | „ „ | about 450 B.C. |
| Joel | . . . | „ „ | „ 440 B.C. |

# I

## AMOS: THE PROPHET OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.—Amos v. 24.

AMOS is the first of the literary prophets. Before his day, the "man of God" had only uttered an isolated prediction and left its record to be preserved in its fulfilment. But with Amos a new order of prophet arises. He is not merely a fore-teller: he is a forth-teller. He comes before us as a great preacher, whose burden it is to tell forth the word of the Lord. As such he is one of the epoch-making men of the Bible. He is indeed one of the most marvellous figures, as Cornill has said, "in the history of the human mind, the pioneer in a process of evolution from which a new epoch of humanity dates."

How this wonderful mission came to Amos we do not know. There is in his life no story of a miraculous call to the ministry, such as we read of in the Book of Isaiah. All we know about him is that he was a humble herdsman on the hills of

Judea, born near Tekoa, a lonely town on the confines of the wilderness. He had no college training like the "sons of the prophets," as the students of the prophetic caste were called. He simply came forth from his lowly task with a fire burning in his soul which would not suffer him to be silent. Some one has said that there are two kinds of preachers: good ones who have something to say and bad ones who *have* to say something; "but there is," says Knudsen, "a third class, those who have something to say and *have* to say it, and to this class belongs Amos." "The Lord hath spoken," he cries, "who can but prophesy?"

It is strange that, belonging as he did to Judea, Amos did not deliver his message in Jerusalem; but he doubtless felt that his words were more needed by Samaria and the northern kingdom. That state was now at the height of its greatness. Under Jeroboam it had risen to great military power, conquering its enemies on every side and extending its borders far and wide.

But with outward prosperity there was inward corruption. The Book of Amos discloses the usual accompaniments of great wealth, pride, formalism, moral degradation, and above all oppression of the poor and perversion of justice. In all this, the prophet sees the signs of approaching judgment. The "carcase" is there and "the

eagles" will soon be gathering together. He can already descry these in the eastern horizon. It is the Assyrians he has doubtless in his mind, though he never names them. Under the dreaded Tiglath-pileser, that "bitter and hasty nation" was soon to sweep down upon the land and leave nothing but white bones behind them.

All this was to happen within a generation; yet, strange to say, neither Jerusalem nor Samaria realised the peril of their position. "Woe to them that are at ease in Zion and trust in the mountain of Samaria." Amos feels impelled to awake them to repentance and persuade them to return to the paths of righteousness while yet there is time. Thus it came to pass that one day, possibly at some great annual feast, there appeared this strange sight of this uncultured herdsman from the hills, who nevertheless spoke with such passionate conviction and such eloquence of tongue that the multitudes were at once riveted by his words and realized that a great prophet had again risen in their midst.

Jerome has said of him that "he was rude in speech, but not in knowledge." But this is only partially true. There are roughnesses in Amos' addresses, pointing to his humble origin; but scholars tell us that his style is limpid and his Hebrew pure. That would surprise us did

we not remember that, whenever a great genius arises from the people, his style is usually pure. It was so with Bunyan; it was so with Robert Burns; it was so with Abraham Lincoln. These great men all spoke or wrote with a purity and vividness of language that at once made their words burn. And it was so with Amos. He was a born orator. We can see that even from the written word; but what must it have been to hear him, as with eyes flashing with holy fire, he cried, "Take away from me the noise of thy songs. Neither will I hear the melody of thy viols. But let justice run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream"?

Let us now turn to his book and ask ourselves what were the great religious ideas which it expresses.

I. The first is that of *the Universal Sovereignty of God*. God to Amos was no tribal deity, as most of the nations and many even of his own nation believed. His eyes "run to and fro throughout the whole earth," and no nation can hope to escape His punishment because it is beyond the range of His arm or claims the peculiar privilege of His particular regard.

Unlike the other prophets before him, who had confined their message largely to their own nation, Amos begins his prophecy with a series of vivid

pictures, painting before his hearers the sins of the surrounding nations.

These pictures all begin in the same way: "Thus saith the Lord, for three transgressions and for four"—a striking phrase which may be translated in modern language, "For crime after crime." In this way he solemnly arraigns Damascus, Philistia, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab, Judah and Israel before the throne of Divine Judgment, and as upon one after another these solemn words fell with a prophecy of judgment they must have sounded like the plangent tones of a funeral bell.

It is further to be noted that these crimes are nearly all social transgressions. He does not denounce Damascus for its idolatry. He denounces it because "it had threshed the inhabitants of Gilead with a threshing-flail of iron." He does not denounce Tyre because it worshipped Baal; but because it had sold the captives of war into slavery. He does not denounce Israel because it worshipped the golden Calf, but because it had sold "the poor for silver, the needy for a pair of shoes."

And so with nearly all the rest. It is social injustice that chiefly rouses Amos' wrath. His whole book, as Prof. McFadyen has said, is "a cry for justice."

As the Israelites listened to the sins of their neighbours, they were not displeased. We all like to hear of the sins of our neighbours. But when he turned the sword against themselves, it was another matter. Yet this is what he now proceeded to do. "Thus saith the Lord, for crime after crime, I will not turn away the punishment of Israel; because they sold the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of shoes; that pant after the dust of the earth on the head of the poor, and turn aside the way of the meek. . . . Therefore thus saith the Lord God, an adversary shall there be even round about the land; and he shall bring down thy strength from thee, and thy palaces shall be spoiled."[1]

His first complaint is that the judges have corrupted justice at what should have been its fountain-head. The class that should have directed the nation has exploited for gain. They have sold the righteous for silver, the poor for a bribe so paltry as a pair of shoes.

Nor was this all. Licentiousness of the most flagrant type disgraced its streets. "A man and his father will go in unto the same maid to profane My holy name."[2] Intemperance flooded the land. Even the Rechabites, the great temperance society of the nation, had become debauched, so that the

[1] ii. 6, 7; iii. 11. [2] ii.

vows of its members were broken without a blush. "Ye gave the Nazirites wine to drink."[1] Even its womanhood was corrupt. "Ye cows of Bashan," he addresses them with the roughness of a cowherd, "who say to your lords, 'Come and let us drink' while ye oppress the poor with your godless luxury, the day is coming when your dead bodies shall be dragged with hooks through the holes of your ruined palaces and cast on the streets like carcases in a slaughter-house."[2]

As the people listened to these terrible denunciations, the pleasure with which they had listened to his indictments of the foreign nations changed to resentment, and when he goes on to tell them that their religious feasts are an abomination to the Lord and that "Bethel shall come to nought," their anger rose to fury, and by the hand of Amaziah their high priest they thrust him forth contumeliously out of the land. He reminded Amos that he was an alien, and a very undesirable alien. "Go back," he said, "to your own land and preach to your own people. They need it more. For us, we are a people of privilege. The marvellous prosperity we enjoy is a proof of that. Had you spoken in the days of Elijah, you might have been justified in what you have said. But well do you know that since Jehu stamped Baal-

[1] ii. 12. [2] iv. 1–3.

worship out of the land, no strange God has divided our allegiance to Jehovah. Flee to your own land, you rough cowherd! Preach there if you like; but do not dare to utter more of your impudence here, else it will be worse for you. Jeroboam is not a king to be trifled with!" [1]

Tradition says that Amaziah added positive persecution to his threats, and that Amos was deported across the frontier shamefully handled. It may well have been so, for the language with which Amos took leave of him can only be justified on the grounds of strong provocation. "Your wife," he said to him, "shall be a harlot in this town; your sons and daughters shall fall by the sword and you yourself shall die in a foreign land, for Israel is indeed to be led off to exile, far from its native land." [2]

So Amos was silenced; but the shutting of his lips was the unloosing of his pen. He went back to his own land to write down in a book all he had said to Samaria, "and many like words." Thus almost unconsciously he became the first of the literary prophets of the Bible. The poor despised cowherd became the pioneer of a mighty movement whose result is the Bible as we have it to-day. With such feeble instruments does God work mighty results.

[1] Chap. vi. [2] Chap. vii. 17 (Moffatt's translation).

And the first of the truths he lays down in that prophecy is, as I have said, the truth that God is the moral Governor of all the nations, and that He is impartial in that Government. No nation can hope to escape His judgment on the ground that it is God's own peculiar people. You call yourself "a people of privilege," do you? So you are; but do you think that because of these privileges you will escape the righteous judgment of Jehovah for your iniquities? On the contrary, on you will fall the heavier punishment. God will punish every nation that forgets Him. All these peoples shall feel the weight of His rod, but on you it will fall heaviest of all just because of your privileges. "You only have I known of all the families of the earth, therefore"—will I condone you? therefore will I wink at your sins? no, "therefore will I punish you for all your iniquities."[1]

God's sovereignty of the nations is universal and it is impartial. He is no tribal deity, favouring one and punishing another. He is the judge of all the earth, and as such will do right and only right.

This lesson which Amos taught "the house of Isaac" is one which all nations have need to learn. There is too much of this tribal theory of God prevalent still. We saw it in the Great War when every nation tried to assure itself that God

[1] iii. 2.

was on its side. As one said, it would have been more to the point if they had asked themselves whether they were on the side of God.

We see it too in such phrases as "the white man's God," "God's own country," and the belief widely held that "niggers have no soul."

We see it too in the belief that because God has blessed a country with material advantages for many years, He has a peculiar affection for that country and will never cast it off. Does history in any way support such a tribal theory of God? Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Jerusalem, Greece, Rome,—where are they? They have all passed away. If we forget God, if we shut our Bibles, forsake our churches, profane our Sabbaths; if our young women sink into frivolity and selfish luxury, if our young men riot in licentiousness and drunkenness, have we any right to believe that God will say anything less to us than He said to Israel long ago: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth. Therefore will I punish you for all your iniquities"?

II. And this brings us to the second great truth which Amos embodies in his little book. It is, namely, that the only true worship which is acceptable with God is the worship of *righteousness in heart and life.*

Of course, this thought is not confined to him.

We find it in all the prophets. But Amos was probably the first to announce it. He is the pioneer in the path in which Hosea and Isaiah and Micah so gloriously followed. And nowhere is this grand ethical note of true worship struck with finer emphasis than in the words of our text: "I hate, I despise your feasts. . . . Though ye offer Me burnt-offerings, I will not accept them. . . . Take away from Me the noise of thy songs, neither will I hear the melody of thy viols, but let justice run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream."

"In these words," as one has said, "we have expressed with clearness and finality the absolute worthlessness of mere ceremonialism and the supreme value of righteousness in the religious life." Would that the Church had laid them more to heart! Too often have its members fallen into this the worst of all heresies, that correctness of ritual, orthodoxy of doctrine, and above all generosity of gifts to God's altar, can atone for an evil life. It was this that made Luther nail his theses on the Church gate of Wittenberg, the idea that by the tinkle of a coin in the Pope's collecting-box a soul could fly into heaven. But the same error, less grossly, has been found in the Reformed Church. Whenever we imagine that by orthodoxy of doctrine or largeness

of benefactions we can cover a multitude of sins, we are just falling into the same error as Amos condemned when he said, "Seek not Bethel," that is, *the house* of God, "but seek the Lord Himself, and ye shall live, ye who turn judgment to wormwood and leave off righteousness in the earth."

III. In closing, while the prophecy of Amos is largely a message of judgment, it would not be fair to the prophet without noticing the *Message of Hope which runs through it.*

That message is specially to be found in its closing chapter, where the prophet strikes a more hopeful note than is usually present in the previous ones. "Behold," he says, "the days come, saith the Lord, that the ploughman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him that soweth seed, and the mountains shall drop sweet wine and the hills shall melt, and I will bring again the captivity of My people of Israel, and they shall build the waste cities and inhabit them."[1]

It has indeed been said that these words are too tender to have come from Amos's fierce lips, and must have come from a later scribe who could not bear to see his book end in unrelieved gloom. But whatever view we take of that, this is not the only place in which we see a message of hope. It is indeed a slender one; but still it is there.

[1] Chap. ix. 13, 14.

"Hate the evil," he says elsewhere, "love the good; . . . it may be the Lord God of Hosts will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph."[1] It will only be a remnant, but still it will be there. All will not be lost, and when the day of trouble darkens upon you, as I foretold, then remember that I said also this: "Seek Him that maketh the seven stars and Orion, and turneth the shadow of death into the morning . . . the Lord is His Name."[2]

These beautiful words are no doubt a reminiscence of the prophet's life on the hills. Often in the night he had watched these great constellations, of the Plough and Orion's belt, as he watched his herds upon the mountains. As he looked at these wondrous star hosts, the same in the past as now, he had seen the eastern sky grow grey with the dawn until at last its great shafts of light had chased away the shadows from the hills. "He turneth the shadow of death into the morning!"

A comforting message! And to be fulfilled in a wonderful way. For it was from that poor despised remnant that Galilee in later days was largely peopled, and it was from them that there came the earliest disciples of the "Light of the World," "The people which sat in darkness saw a

[1] Chap. v. 15. [2] v. 8.

great light, and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death, light is sprung up."

"Seek Him that turneth the shadow of death into the morning"—they are words which have a message of comfort to every age. They come to every mourner, to every fearful heart, to every sin-shadowed soul with the same promise of deliverance as they were meant to bring long ago. If you turn into the Grange Cemetery in Edinburgh you will see there the grave of one of Scotland's greatest preachers and philanthropists, Thomas Guthrie, and on the stone that marks it you will see inscribed these beautiful words. It was by his own wish they were put there. "Don't put any grandiloquent epitaph on my tomb," he said as he lay dying; "put simply a text that may arrest some passer-by and lead him to the light. Put the words of Amos: 'Seek Him that turneth the shadow of death into the morning.' " And so it was done; and the visitor to his lowly grave will see there no eloquent tribute to the friend of the ragged children, but only these great words of him who, sent to his nation as a messenger of judgment, could not leave them save as a Herald of Hope.

## II

### HOSEA: THE PROPHET OF REPENTANCE

O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity. Take with you words, and turn to the Lord, and say unto Him, Take away all iniquity, and receive us graciously: so will we render the calves of our lips.—HOSEA xiv. 1, 2.

HOSEA is the great prophet of repentance. He lived shortly after Amos and saw the same things to condemn in his people as the earlier prophet did. But he saw them with a more "piteous eye." He denounces their doom, indeed, in words as tremendous as the stern herdsman of Tekoa, but he is always breaking out into calls to repentance; grounding his appeal upon God's love to them in the past, to which their history had so often borne witness, and promising them that if they do repent God, Who is the true "Husband" of their nation, will return to them in love as in the days of their espousals long ago.

In our text we see the climax of these calls to repentance, which Hosea so often makes. "O

Israel," he says, "return unto the Lord thy God, for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity. Take with you words and turn to the Lord."

"Take with you *words*"—notice the prophet's emphasis on the importance of putting their repentance into words. We sometimes depreciate words. "A man," we say, "of words, not deeds, is like a garden full of weeds." Christ Himself emphasizes that. He tells us of the son who said to his father, "I go, sir," and went not, and declares that not he that "saith unto Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven."

But there are times when words are deeds. It was said of Luther, "His words were half-battles." There are crises in life when words are of profound significance. The words of the marriage vow, for example, when "I will" makes two lives one; the words at some great national crisis, when a great statesman has called the nation to resolution by his wise and thrilling appeals; the words of a poet, when in a few lines harmonies of exquisite thought and music are married in an eternal union, whose fruit is "a thing of beauty" which is "a joy for ever."

Now in this call to repentance the prophet emphasizes the power of words, and rightly so; because words mean the articulation of emotion. When a mother is dealing with a wayward child,

she strives to make him say, "I am sorry"; and when she has done so she feels a great step has been gained. His repentance has been made real and definite. So Hosea strives to make Israel's repentance articulate. "Take with you words."

Such words need not be spoken aloud. They can be inscribed in the tablets of your own hearts. In old Bibles I have seen "covenants" which young people used to write when they were joining the Church. They pledged themselves to do certain things and sometimes, to make it more solemn, signed it with their blood. We need not all do that; but I am sure it would be good for some of us if when we joined the Church we were to say something to God we have never yet said.

A great writer tells a story of a girl who had gone astray. Her father followed her and tried to get her back. But her seducer said, "No. She is of age. She shall not go unless by her own expressed word." Then the father pleaded with her, gave her incontestable proofs of the dangerous character of her betrayer, and besought her to speak the word of renunciation. For a moment it seemed as if she were about to do so, when suddenly she caught sight of her seducer's eye fixed upon her. She faltered, turned weeping away, and said, "No, I cannot, dare not go back."

Her father pleaded again, but all in vain. He had to leave her, and when he saw her next she was dead. For want of that one word, she was lost.

There are souls that feel the wretchedness of sin, but cannot frame the words of renunciation. They cannot say with the prodigal, "I will arise and go to my Father." They take with them feelings, desires, longings, but they cannot frame them into words. "Take with you words."

What were the words which the prophet seeks to hear from a repentant Israel? They are the three "R's" of Repentance—Return, Receive and Render.

I. There are the words of Return: "Return unto the Lord . . . and say unto Him, Take away all iniquity."

Notice that word "iniquity." It is not "Take away all our faults or shortcomings, or even vices." No, the prophet uses a far bigger word than that, a word that points the soul back to God as the great ultimate of the soul's appeal. As David said, "Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned," though he had sinned against Uriah and against the wife of Uriah, because the sin against God was something so great and terrible that like a thick cloud it blotted out all else; so when the prophet bids his people to return to God, he bids them do

so with no extenuation, no false excuses, but with that naked word "iniquity" upon their lips, the cry of a soul that pleads for God's forgiveness as the first, the supreme necessity of its life. "Take away all iniquity."

Such a prayer contains within itself its answer. When a man prays it with all his heart he feels as Saul Kane feels in Masefield's great poem, that he is done with sin. "The burning cataracts of Christ" have rushed into his soul and quenched the old false thirst for ever.

> I did not think, I did not strive.
> The deep peace burnt my soul alive.
> The bolted door had broken in.
> I knew that I had done with sin.

Take away *all* iniquity.

II. So we come to the second word Hosea longs to hear in a repentant Israel. It is the word "Receive"—"Receive us graciously."

The word literally means: "Receive us, as if we were good." Take a sponge and blot out the past. It is a bold thing to ask. "Esaias is very bold"; but I think Hosea is even bolder, when after the terrible denunciations we find in his prophecy, he closes with this prayer, "Accept us as if we were already good."

How can he say it? It is because he himself had had such a wondrous vision of the forgiving

love of God. No prophet in all "the goodly fellowship" beats him in that. No prophet in all the "goodly fellowship" equals him in that.

And why? If you read the first three chapters of his book you will know why. You will there see how Hosea had come to have such a marvellous conception of the height and depth and length and breadth of the forgiving love of God. It was out of his own experience. The prophet himself was one who had "loved and lost." Aye, worse than lost. Worse than if she whom he loved were lying in the grave; for then her memory had been hallowed and softened by tears that have no shame in them. But it was not so with Gomer, the young and beautiful bride which he had brought home to his house with such joy and hope. Very soon she had tired of him, played him false and finally left him for a life of shame.

And yet did the prophet cease to love her because of that? Did he divorce her and mention her name only with loathing and hatred? No, he loved her still. Nothing could destroy his affection for her. And, most wonderful of all, one day when he came upon her in a strange city whither she had fled, finding her there, as a slave self-sold into the hands of one who used her for the vilest purposes, he had bought her back, back to his home and heart, as if she had never sinned. In a

word, he had received her "graciously"—received her "as if she was good."

And it is just out of that experience of his own love that the prophet rises to his conception of the love of God. "For," as Dean Farrar says, "if the love of man can be so deep, how unfathomable must be the love of God!" It is by the human we often rise to the divine. If his love had been able to do that, for his poor misguided, repentant wife, how much more will the love of God "receive as graciously and love us freely"![1]

[1] It will be apparent that I adopt the modern interpretation of the first three chapters of Hosea and see in them a literal though veiled autobiography. In earlier times, as is well known, it was the custom to understand these chapters as a pure allegory, which had no foundation in fact, and there is a recent disposition on the part of some of the best critics to return to this view. Knudson, e.g., gives an illustration of the power of the dramatic imagination in the case of Ibsen, who in his dramas gives the most pessimistic pictures of domestic life, while his own home life was far from unhappy. But a preacher is not a dramatist and psychologically it is most unlikely that a man can preach with any power of things of which he has had no experience. Besides there is something unnatural in a poet like Hosea taking hold of a figure so ugly, if he had not been driven to it, as it were, by his own bitter past. As G. A. Smith says: "Only the real pain of that experience could have made the man brave enough to use it as a figure of God's treatment of Israel."

Of course, in that case, we must understand the words "Go, take unto thee a wife of whoredoms" (i. 2) proleptically, for we cannot conceive God as calling on the prophet to be "unequally yoked" with a woman of shame, simply in order that he might be

It is this that makes Hosea the most Christlike of all the "minor" prophets. For this is what Christ came into the world to tell men, this is what He died on Calvary to tell us, that God is love, Who will forgive the penitent sinner and receive him "as if he were good."

III. Lastly, we come to the response which a love so great should elicit from those to whom it is offered. That is gathered up in the third word, "*Render*," which Hosea rings out as the closing message of his call to repentance. "So will we render the calves of our lips."

The phrase is a curious one, and contains perhaps a contemptuous reference to the material sacrifices which the people were so ready to offer as an atonement for their sins. The Israelites were trying to make peace with God by piling hecatombs upon His altar. God does not want these. "I will have mercy and not sacrifice," he

"a sign to His people." What the prophet means is that God, Who is behind all the mysteries of our most painful experiences, had allowed him to be drawn away to love one who, though when he knew her first she was pure and true, yet in after-days was led away by a false attachment into a life of sin and shame. The prophet's love was not quenched by such a betrayal. Hence in chapter iii, *v.* 1 we read, "Then said the Lord unto me, go *yet*, love a woman, beloved of her friend, *yet* an adulteress." . . . "So I bought her to me for fifteen pieces of silver."

says in an epigram which was a favourite quotation on the lips of Jesus. What He wants is the sacrifice of the contrite heart and the surrendered will, and it is this he means by the sacrifice of "the lips."

For what does this sacrifice mean? It means, I think, in the first place "testimony," the testimony of a soul that has received pardon and is not ashamed to own its Lord. When a man is truly forgiven, God opens his lips. If "the torpor of the ready tongue is the beginning of knowledge," as Socrates tells us, the unloosing of the stammering one is the end of repentance. "Come, all ye, and hear what God hath done for my soul," is the language of the man who has been taken out of "the fearful pit and the miry clay."

But while testimony to past blessing is part of "the fruit of the lips," it is by no means the whole. It must also be accompanied by vows of future dedication. The prophet gives an outline of what these should be. "Asshur," he continues, "shall not save us. We will not ride upon horses" (that is, seek an alliance with Egypt with its horses and chariots), "neither will we trust any more in the work of our own hands." In other words, the prophet means to say that henceforth they were to rely on Jehovah and Jehovah alone. They were to cast away all the old false props in which they

were wont to trust. God and God alone was to be their trust in the future.

If such "fruits of the lips" were offered to God, the prophet assures them of a glorious future. The strength and beauty of a consecrated life would be theirs. God would shed down upon them the dew of His grace. They would grow "as the lily and cast forth their roots as Lebanon. Their branches would spread and their beauty be as the olive tree and their smell as Lebanon."

The greatest lives are those that have had great repentances. There is not one of us to whom these words have not their own application, for "all of us have sinned and come short of the glory of God." But there may be some of us to whom these words have a message all their own. You have sinned and sinned deeply in these past days. Your "very clothes abhor you." You have played false with the highest and purest feelings of your nature. Like Hosea's unfaithful wife, you have done things that bring the blush to your cheek.

Now listen! That experience may be to you "a savour of life unto life, or of death unto death." If you think to atone for it by giving a money gift to God or the Church, if you think you will live it down by simply forgetting all about it, you are making a deadly blunder. Sin is not sponged out in that fashion. "There's the smell of blood

still." The past cannot be buried in a grave of forgetfulness like that.

But if, on the other hand, you make this hour of contrition the starting-point for a deep and real repentance toward God; if that repentance be accompanied by confession, reparation and resolution; if, above all, it brings you to the Cross of Christ, there to acknowledge yourself a sinner and to plead for His mercy and His grace, then this hour may be to you the beginning of days. It may be the starting-point for a new and holier life, in which that strength and beauty of which the prophet speaks shall become the growing elements of your character and life, and by means of which you will come to realize that your very sins have been turned by God's grace into the greatest blessings of your life. For,

> "I hold it true with him who sings
> To one clear harp in divers tones
> That men may rise on stepping-stones,
> Of their dead selves to higher things."

## III

### MICAH: THE PROPHET OF MERCY

He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?—MICAH vi. 8.

He delighteth in mercy.—MICAH vii. 18.

IF Amos be the prophet of Justice and Hosea that of Repentance, Micah is the prophet of Mercy. It is true he thunders forth the wrath of God against sin, with no less emphasis than his predecessors. But he ends in Mercy. The thunder-cloud bursts into drops of Mercy, falling at the close of his prophecy with sweet refreshings on the parched and blasted land.

Micah was contemporary with Isaiah, but, unlike him, dwelt in the country all his days. He did not love cities. "What is the transgression of Jacob?" he asks. "Is it not Samaria?" "And what are the high places of Judah? Are they not Jerusalem?" Like Cowper, he fled from these places where "Satan waged his most successful war," and lived beside the hills beneath which he was born. He came from Moresheth-gath, from

which he could look up every day at those mountains of Israel, which on one great day at the close of his life he summoned to be witnesses of God's controversy with His people.

Though Micah is little known to-day, his preaching evidently made a profound impression in his own age. We have a striking proof of that in the fact that it was recalled a hundred years after in the days of Jeremiah. When the enemies of that plain-speaking prophet wished to put him to death because he had spoken evil of his country, it was recalled that a similar attempt had been made in the case of Micah, and that Hezekiah had refused to give him up to their will, on the ground that he was a true prophet of Jehovah. It is clear, therefore, from this reference to him (Jer. xxvi. 8–24) that his message had not only made a profound impression on those who heard it, but that it was remembered for many years after he was gone.

Unfortunately it has been preserved in a very fragmentary form. It is often very difficult to see the sequence of his thought. His book "reads like a collection of extracts" taken from longer oral discourses by a reporter who had no shorthand and could only pick up the more striking sentences of it. At the same time, enough is preserved to give one the impression of a personality of no

ordinary courage, and a teacher of far-reaching truths.

The book divides itself into three parts. In the first, chapters i. to iii., Judgment predominates. In the second, chapters iv. and v., Mercy predominates. In the third, chapters vi. and vii., there is a subtle mingling of both. The Lord's controversy begins with gloom, but in the end mercy breaks forth again. As Tennyson says in his vision of sin:

> "On the glimmering summit far withdrawn
> God made Himself an awful rose of dawn."

Let us run briefly over these, before dwelling on the great promise of Mercy which forms the closing message of the prophet.

Chapters i. to iii. are largely, as we have said, a vision of Judgment. The prophet begins by denouncing both Israel and Judah for their idolatry; but he passes on from their religious dereliction to dwell with even fiercer indignation on their moral and social offences. He has been called "the prophet of the poor" (Jordan), and there is reason for the ascription, for there is no prophet who is more fierce in his descriptions of the oppression of the wealthy than this humble Morasthite. "Woe unto them," he cries, "that devise iniquity and work evil upon their beds.

When the morning is light they practise it, because it is in the power of their hand" (ii. 1, R.V.). "They build up Zion with blood, and Jerusalem with iniquity" (iii. 10, R.V.). "Therefore," he tells them, "shall Zion for your sake be ploughed as a field and Jerusalem shall become heaps" (iii. 12). It was doubtless for this that the false prophets turned upon him and wished to put him to death. But Hezekiah intervened, and in return for this the judgment was delayed, as we learn from his contemporary Isaiah (Isa. xxxix. 8).

If the first part of Micah's prophecy is one of almost unqualified judgment, the second opens with a bright promise of mercy. "But in the latter days it shall come to pass that the mountain of the Lord's House shall be established on the top of the mountains . . . and peoples shall flow unto it" (iv. 1, R.V.). This exquisite passage evidently made a deep impression on its time. Isaiah has it almost verbatim, and it may have been from it that he first got his Messianic hope.[1] The prophet does not go back on his former message of doom. On the contrary, he emphasizes it, but he sees far beyond it to a better and a grander day, and even prophesies the town from which the deliverer is to arise. "But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among

[1] But possibly both prophets got it from another source.

the thousands of Israel, out of thee shall he come forth unto me, that is to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting." How did the prophet come to have this wondrous hope? We do not know. Goethe said of some of his poems that there were things in them of which he was unconscious when he wrote them. It may have been so with Micah. He could not know all that was to be gathered out of these mystic words. But they came to him and he uttered them, and hundreds of years after, other eyes looked into them and read from them things wonderful and glorious.

We now pass to the *third* and perhaps the greatest part of Micah's book, his dramatic arraignment of his people, with the mountains of Israel and Judah for witnesses, as he details to them the reasons of God's controversy with them (chaps. vi. and vii.).

It has been contended by many (whose names entitle them to respect) that these chapters are not by Micah. They breathe, it is said, a different air. They have a tone of gloom and despondency which must have come from the later age of Manasseh, and their style is different from the earlier part of the book.

With all deference to these authorities, it seems to us that these two chapters blend together in a

very striking way the thoughts of the two earlier parts of the book, Judgment and Mercy. As to their despondent tone there is in them nothing gloomier than is to be found in the companion writings of Isaiah. "The whole head is sick and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it" (Isa. i. 5–6, and following), and as Driver says: "With such a small basis to argue from we are hardly entitled to pronounce the dramatic form of these chapters inconsistent with Micah's authorship." The fact that they were always regarded as one with the rest is a stronger argument, to our mind, than anything that can be said against their authenticity. We regard them as Micah's swan song, written at a time of spiritual declension, when the prophet, cast down by the ruin of the northern king and the menaces of his own, stays himself on God and looks forward to the performance in a dim and distant future of the promise which God had "sworn unto his fathers from the days of old" (vii. 20).

The prophet begins by reminding them of God's unwearied goodness in other days, and their strange response to that goodness. Then follows the answer which he conceives his people to make. With conscience-stricken repentance they are willing to make the atonement of sacrifice and

ritual. "Will the Lord be pleased with burnt-offerings, with thousands of rams, with rivers of oil?" Will they give even their children to appease His wrath, "the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul"? Nay; far other is the sacrifice God desires. "He hath shown thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (vi. 8).

In these words, as Prof. Huxley has said, Hebrew prophecy attains its high-water mark: "In the eighth century before Christ, in the heart of a world of idolatry, a Hebrew prophet put forth a conception of religion which is as wonderful an inspiration of genius as the art of Phidias or the science of Aristotle: 'What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.'"

We need not linger over *the passion for righteousness* which inspires these words. That is abundantly evident in his book. In that he was a true disciple of Amos. Like his great contemporary, ritual to him could never be a substitute for righteousness. Right doing must always go before right ceremonial.

But we may dwell for a moment on his *passion for mercy*, since it is the new element in his preaching.

We are not only to "do justly," he says, but to "*love mercy*." Mercy to him is more than justice. We are *to do* the one, but *to love* the other. If Justice compels you to go a mile, Mercy freely goes twain. If Justice says, "Pay me that thou owest," Mercy listens to the supplicant's cry, "Have patience with me," and forgives him "all that debt."

In his walks abroad Micah saw little of this "gentle rain of heaven" falling either on Judah's hills or Samaria's valleys. Shylock, with his dripping "pound of flesh," stalked ever before him, a hideous cannibal, making his heart rise up in wrath, so that he felt "full of power by the Spirit of the Lord." He has a striking picture of these social tyrants, flaying the very skin off their victims and chopping up their flesh in order to put them into their "caldrons," in which they cook their hideous hell-broth (iii. 1–4). And then, he exclaims, after partaking of this abominable broth, "they cry unto the Lord." Will Jehovah listen to such worshippers? Surely not! When He does answer, it will be to say to His faithful ones, "Arise ye and depart, for this is not your rest."

Now Cannibalism in that old crude form is out of fashion to-day. To see it you must take a trip to New Guinea or the depths of Africa. But the spirit of the thing—is it unknown to-day? Are

there not areas of our industrial life to-day in which this sweet word "Mercy" has dropped out of the vocabulary. Indulgence for the weak or erring has no place. The cry is: "Get on or get out." Industry is sweated to the last drop of blood, and "The Song of the Shirt" is still heard in our land. See the starved mothers and naked children in many parts of our slums to-day! Read of families living in London seven to one room.[1] Is it after all much better than Cannibalism? Is it a worse plight to be put to a quick death than to be left to slow extinction in misery and starvation?

God says the prophet cannot look on such scenes with indifference. He "delighteth in mercy," and they who would be his followers must not go only the first mile of justice but the second mile of mercy.

Last of all Micah insists on *a humble walk with God* as the essential and crown of a true religion. "He hath showed thee, O man, what is good . . . to walk humbly with thy God."

It is sometimes said that Micah's epitome of religion is imperfect. It moves simply among the moralities. It takes no account of Creed and Worship. It needs to be supplemented by the New Testament.

[1] *Spectator*, November 2, 1928.

I cannot see how such a criticism is fair when one considers all that is meant by "walking with God." Surely Micah touches bottom when he says that! Does that not imply a creed? How can anyone walk with God without knowing who God is? "Can two walk together except they be agreed?" To my mind there is no better definition of the religious life than that it is a humble walking with God.

Such a walk will inevitably lead to a transformation of character and conduct. You all remember Brother Lawrence's little book on *The Practice of the Presence of God*. The sense that God was with him everywhere, in the kitchen as well as in the chapel, on the street as well as on his knees, produced upon him an entire revolution of life. It became the secret of peace of mind, contentment in duty, resignation in trial, love to his fellow-men and above all humility in his heart.

It is to that last result, Humility, the crown of all the virtues as St. Augustine calls it, that Micah refers when he speaks here of walking "*humbly*" with God. Walking in the white light of a purity in which his best actions are seen to be tainted with self, the man who walks with God will be above all things a humble man. Like Isaiah, he will say, "Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips! For mine eyes have seen the

King, the Lord of Hosts." Like Peter on Galilee's shore, he will say to Jesus, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

Yet Peter did not depart from Christ. His life belied his words. He followed Him wherever He went. Yes, because he realized that though the holiness of Jesus rebuked his selfishness and sin at every step, there was a mercy shining behind it all that ever enabled him to follow on in faith and hope, a love that bound him with a chain he could not break.

It is this Micah beautifully expresses in our second text, where in his closing words he breaks out into the exquisite prayer which crowns his message to a backsliding and broken Israel: "Who is a God like unto thee, that pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He retaineth not His anger for ever, because He delighteth in mercy" (vii. 18).

Scottish readers will always associate these words with the name of one of their greatest preachers. It was a favourite text of Dr. Whyte, of St. George's, Edinburgh, and in the sermon he preached from it, one of the most thrilling passages was a striking incident out of his own experience. He was visiting one of his leading office-bearers on a matter of Church business, a stiff Edinburgh

lawyer, from whom one would as little expect emotional display as from the dry documents in which his life was lived. Yet, when the business was over, it was this man who, suddenly pushing the papers aside, looked up to Dr. Whyte and said, "Doctor, have you any word that would help to comfort a poor auld sinner?" Dr. Whyte was amazed. This was the last question he had expected at such a time, but standing for a moment in doubt as to what to say, the words of Micah suddenly floated into his mind, and grasping his hand he said, "He delighteth in mercy." Then swiftly he turned on his heel and left the room. Next morning a letter came from his friend, telling him that he had been for many weeks in great spiritual darkness and that these words had let a ray of light into his soul, in which he hoped to walk "till travelling days were done."

With that comforting word Micah leaves his people, with that we would close his message to us. "Who is among you, that walketh in darkness and hath no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord and stay upon his God," for "He delighteth in mercy."

## IV

### ISAIAH: THE PROPHET OF FAITH.—(I) THE MAKING OF THE PROPHET

In the year King Uzziah died, I saw also the Lord.—ISAIAH vi. 1 and ff.

IN Isaiah we come to one of the greatest, if not the very greatest of the literary prophets of the Old Testament. In the splendour of his style, in the loftiness of his personality, in the prominent place he took in the nation's history and in the broad and far-reaching character of his teaching, he stands out as one of the great personalities of the Bible. In a single chapter or even in two or three chapters, it will, of course, be quite impossible to deal with this great prophet as he deserves. I can only touch the fringe of his garment. But even such a cursory glance will not be without value. It will give an insight into his mind that will illuminate the whole of his teaching. Here we look chiefly at him *in "the making,"* how he came to be the man he was; in other words, at *Isaiah's Call and Commission.*

The Bible is a book of calls. We have Abram's call and Moses' call, Samuel's call and David's call, Jeremiah's call and Ezekiel's call in the Old Testament, and in the New the call of the Apostles, Peter's call and Paul's call; but in some ways there is none so rich in spiritual significance as the call of the youthful Isaiah from what seems to have been a gay life in the highest circles of Jerusalem to be the stern unbending prophet of Jehovah in the midst of a godless city.

Let us note first the *time at which it came to him*. It was "in the year King Uzziah died." That is no mere date. It is a spiritual epoch. Uzziah had been one of Jerusalem's greatest kings. Under his rule the little kingdom had prospered marvellously. He had enlarged its borders on every side. He had conquered the Ammonites and the Philistines. He had built a seaport on the Red Sea and through it the wealth of the Orient had poured into the city of David and Solomon, which had enjoyed a wealth and honour never known since their day. Among all this Isaiah had grown up a gay young gallant, and his ardent and imaginative youth had doubtless shared in the admiration and reverence in which every one held their illustrious monarch.

And then suddenly it all came to an end. "He was marvellously helped until he was strong, but

when he was strong his heart was lifted up to his own destruction." With unhallowed fire Uzziah had entered into the Holy Place, and there, in spite of the protests of the priests, he was about to offer up the sacrifice, which it was not lawful for any but the priests to offer, when suddenly the hand of God struck him with leprosy. Doubtless the disease had been working secretly in his blood before, but it was then, under perhaps the excitement of the hour, that the "white spot" blazed out in his forehead. Leprosy! That disease most loathed of any in Palestine, both from its hopelessness and contagion, had laid hold of the great king. The priests at once detected it and would have hurried him out; but there was no need to do so. "Yea, he himself hasted to go out." In a moment the mighty monarch passed from the people's sight and was never again seen by them. For two years he lingered in a leper's hospital and then sank into a leper's grave.

All this Isaiah had seen, and it had deeply impressed him. He had been living a careless life; but now he became thoughtful. "Fifty years of glory and then a lazar-house." What a commentary on the vanity of human life! He began to frequent the Temple, to meditate and pray, and it was on one of those days, possibly on the day when the funeral service of the dead king was

taking place, that he had the great vision which became the turning-point in his life. "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw also the Lord."

Let us look at this great experience carefully. As we do so we shall see in it the great thoughts that moved through the prophet's whole life and made him the man he was. They are mainly three : a *Vision of God*, a *Vision of Self*, and a *Vision of Duty*.

I. *First of all there is a vision of God* as the supreme reality of life. That is essential to all who would do any great work for man. Newman has said of a time in his life: "God and my soul were the only realities." It was so now with Isaiah. As the glory of the earthly king fell into ruins before him, he saw God "high and lifted up," rising above them. "Mine eyes," he cried, "have seen the King." Henceforth there was no other king but God. The sovereignty of God became the master-light of all his seeing.

And then close on the heels of that follows *the sense of reverence* for this God as infinitely holy. Isaiah makes no attempt to describe God. He was too reverent for that. All he saw was a train of smoke that filled the Temple, probably a symbol of the mystery of God and the impossibility of human eyes seeing Him. But he tells us

that he saw certain wondrous creatures whom he calls Seraphim hovering round the throne and, as they did so, chanting in solemn antiphone their heavenly anthem, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty. The fulness of the earth is Thy glory." Furthermore, these Seraphim, unlike the angels, had six wings, and of these only two were used for their natural purpose. "With twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly." The lesson is obvious. It is that of the Holiness of God, a holiness so awful that even the angels must veil their faces as they stand before it.

Reverence is a condition of all that is highest in human life, whether in work or worship. Reverence is at once the key of knowledge and the vestibule of prayer. "You cannot know anything which you do not reverence," says Phillips Brooks. "You can see nothing before which you do not veil your eyes."

But it is to be noted further that it is not only the eyes that are covered. It is also the feet. Is there not here also a reference to that self-effacement of the worker which is the secret of the highest service? The feet are the instruments of our human and earthly activities, and by the veiling of them the prophet points to that sinking of self in the service of God, which makes a man

think nothing of himself in his work, but seek only the advancement of the kingdom of God.

II. *The Vision of Self.* As the prophet gazes at this wondrous vision, as he listens to the Seraphim's solemn chant, he becomes conscious of himself as infinitely unworthy. The blinding light of God scorches him, as a moth in a flame, and he cries out, "Woe is me! for I am undone, . . . for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts."

This sense of sin as the first immediate result of coming near God is a familiar element in the experience of God's saints. Job has it when he cries, "I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth Thee, wherefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes." Peter expresses the same feeling when on the lake-shore of Galilee he cried out to Jesus, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." It is the natural reaction of the guilty conscience to the Holiness of God, and no man who has truly seen God can be without it.

But what is most remarkable in this experience is the *place* where Isaiah most feels his sins. It is his lips: "I am a man of unclean lips." Why does he mention specially his lips? Was it because as a prophet he most felt the need of purity there? But that would be to change a "post hoc" into a

"propter hoc." Isaiah had no idea of being a prophet when he came to the Temple that day. No, it must have been because it was there he most felt his sin. He had been a man of unclean lips in the past. Among the gay youth of the capital he had dwelt among a people of unclean lips. He had shared in the profanity and uncleanness of their talk, and it is this he now feels stabbing like a dagger. "I am a man of unclean lips."

If this be a true interpretation, it is a wonderful thing. For if there is one thing more remarkable than another about Isaiah it is the transcendent beauty of his style. Burns has spoken of Isaiah's "rapt seraphic fire." It is a true description. He is, as another has said, "the Shakespeare of prophecy," speaking to his people with a beauty and flexibility of diction that the Hebrew language had never known before. It is a striking example of how God can take the worst things in our life and by His grace turn them into the best. As Simon the inconstant became, under the touch of Christ, Peter the Rock, so the man of unclean lips, touched by the fire of God, became to his people the preacher of "the hiding-place from the tempest, the covert from the storm, the rivers of water in a dry place, the shadow of a great rock in a weary land."

This cleansing of the lips was now to take place, and as he laments his stained past he sees one of the Seraphim fly quickly to the altar and take from it one of the live coals glowing there in readiness for sacrifice. With this in his hands he speeds swiftly to the prophet, touches his lips and says, "Lo, this hath touched thy lips and thine iniquity is taken away and thy sin is purged."

It is all done with, his sin, and in a moment! Done without sacrifice or offering. That will come after. Not, indeed, of bulls or of goats. No, but of himself. And I heard a voice, "Who will go for us and whom shall I send? Then said I, Here am I, O Lord, send me."

How quickly comes the answer! Who shall question instantaneous conversions after an experience like this? The fire of God has in a moment changed his whole life. The old man has shrivelled up like a moth in the flames, but out of them has come a new man, the prophet of fire, ready—nay, eager—to go forth and tell his people that there is a God, that He is a consuming fire to all iniquity, but a Rock of Ages to all who put their trust in Him.

III. And this brings us to the third and last movement in this divine symphony: *the prophet's Vision of Duty*, the commission God gave him

before he left the Temple on that great day of his life.

That commission was an extraordinary and a terrible one. He was to go to the people and tell them things about themselves and about God that they would never listen to; nay, worse, to speak to them words that would only harden their hearts the more. As the limpet on the rock, when you try to dislodge it with your fingers, only sticks the more firmly to its foundation and stiffens itself into a stone, so would it be with Isaiah's audience. He was never to be a popular preacher. There would be no grateful presentations in his life. No, the reception he was to meet was to be amazement, dislike, rejection, contumely and persecution.

"Go and say to this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not, and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and its ears heavy, and its eyes besmear, lest it should see with its eyes and hear with its ears, and its heart should understand, and it should be converted and be healed" (Cheyne's Translation).

It was indeed a terrible commission to give to a young and ardent soul, and as the prophet heard it, his heart fainted and he cried, "How long, O Lord? Is this to go on for ever? Is there to be

no gleam of hope in the horizon of my message? And then God comforts him. It is not to be for ever. There will be terrible trials and desolations before the fires of God have wrought their full work of destruction. But in the end there shall be left a remnant purified by these fires and it shall be saved. Like those evergreen trees which even when they are cut down send out new shoots from the stump, so the 'tenth part' of Israel, even when almost consumed, shall be such a 'stump' or 'stock' as its pious remnant, 'the seed of holiness.' " This is Isaiah's doctrine of "the remnant," a familiar teaching in many of the prophets; but in his case gaining a new importance because it is out of it he builds up his Messianic hope.

Such was the call of Isaiah, and now what lesson has it for us? It teaches us, surely, the value of seeing God and receiving from Him a new ideal. Every strong life has its ideal by which it is moulded; but the ideals of some are very poor and unworthy. With some the ideal is one of mere selfish pleasure. "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die," is the purpose under which, consciously or unconsciously, thousands pursue their existence. It is the ideal of the beast, and is as short-lived in its gratifications as it is ignoble in its aim.

Others have the ideal of ambition, money or power or fame. "An enlightened self-interest," said Lord Birkenhead to the Aberdeen students, "is the true end of existence." That, I suppose, is the reason why he gave up being a statesman,—because he could not make enough money by it.

Some have higher ideals than these, but they do not carry them out. They have no constancy and fall from their ideals. Others have no ideals at all. They simply drift. "I once longed," says Amiel, "to yield myself to some grand love, to some noble end. Willingly would I have lived and died for this ideal. But once the impossibility of having such an ideal was made clear to me, I have never taken an interest in anything. Sybarite and dreamer! Will you go on like this to the end? For ever tossed between duty and happiness? Incapable of resolute action?"

Unfortunately Amiel did go on like this to the end. He sank deeper and deeper into a sadness from which only death released him. Many do the same, only in a less noble way. Their lives end as they began in—nothing.

What can save us from these false or insufficient ideals? Only one thing. A new vision of life. A new conception of its meaning and purpose taking possession of the mind. This was the case with Isaiah. "Mine eyes have seen the King,"

he said. The moral sovereignty of God in human life became the great truth of his soul, moulding, inspiring, exalting every thought he cherished, every word he spoke, every deed he did.

Who was this King? The Apostle John says it was Christ. "These things said Esaias, when he saw His glory and spake of Him." What he saw only in shadow, we may surely see in the full glory of Gospel privilege. As we behold the great altar of Calvary and see there a fire of unquenchable love far more glorious than Isaiah ever saw in the earthly Temple, can it be that there shall not come from it a voice lifting our souls into fellowship with the highest, and saying, with a message that penetrates to the depths of our being: "Who will go for us and whom shall I send?" and eliciting from them Isaiah's glad response, "Here am I, send me."

# V

## (2) ISAIAH AS A SOCIAL REFORMER

He looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry.—ISAIAH v. 7.

IN considering Isaiah's call to the prophetic ministry, we saw that the keynote of his great experience was the Supremacy of God. "I saw the Lord high and lifted up." "Mine eyes have seen *the* King," the only true King, "the Lord of Hosts." This is the thought that colours all his thinking; God's Righteousness in social life, God's Honour in political diplomacy.

In this lecture I propose to deal with Isaiah's attitude to the Social Question. Like Amos and Micah he has much to say on it. In especial he speaks with a plainness to the women of Jerusalem that resembles the famous martyr preacher of Florence. "When woman is corrupt," says G. A. Smith, "the state is moribund." Isaiah fixes his piercing eye on the gorgeously dressed women of Jerusalem and, describing their gaudy finery with a detail that would do credit to a dress-

maker, pronounces an approaching doom upon it all. "Instead of sweet scents," he says, "there will soon be the smell of putrefying corpses. Instead of ropes of pearls there will be ropes of hemp around the prisoner's neck. Instead of well-set hair there will be the shaven head of the mourner. Instead of the beauty of the Bride, there will be seen the brand of the slave girl." [1]

Such preaching must have made a solemn impression on some at least of those to whom it was delivered. No doubt it had something to do with Hezekiah's reformation. But for the most part its effect was transitory. Judah was "a sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity." To sum up the whole of his teaching, Isaiah closes his social message with the beautiful Parable of the Vineyard from which our text is taken. It is one of the finest of all his messages, and has a lesson for us to-day as real as it had to old Jerusalem.

This parable divides itself into three parts:

(1) There is first Isaiah's song of the vineyard, a picture of Jerusalem's privilege.

(2) There is the abuse of this privilege, "the wild grapes of Jerusalem."

(3) There is Jehovah's judgment, the wasting of the vineyard.

[1] iii. 16–iv. 1.

I. Isaiah begins with a beautiful picture of Israel, as a well-kept vineyard, on the top of some sunny hill such as you may see still to-day on the banks of the Rhine or the fields of Champagne. How carefully has this vineyard been kept! A great wall defends it from the marauding beast. Its soil has been carefully prepared. The choicest vine-plants have been selected for its culture. A wine-vat has been hewn out of the solid rock to hold its precious juice, and a great tower has been built to preserve the perfected wine at the last. All that the vine-dresser could do has been lavished upon this vineyard. And now the harvest is come, and he goes out from his home in Jerusalem to gather in the fruit of his toil and expense, when, alas! instead of the generous grape with its mellow flavour, what does he find? Only wild grapes! The small sour berries of the Palestine crab-vine; as different from the true vine as crab apples are from Newtown pippins, and more useless!

In vexation and with commercial ruin staring him in the face, the prophet paints this vine-dresser leaving the place for ever! It stands desolate like an old mansion sitting in the midst of collieries! No rich man will live in it. No poor man can keep it up. The walls crumble into ruins; weeds creep over the untended paths.

The wild beast breaks through its broken fence, and soon the desolation is complete.

Such is what the prophet calls "the Song," or better the "Dirge of his Well-beloved." For hitherto he has kept close behind the drapery of his parable, but now he tears that aside and tells us that the Husbandman of the Vineyard is none other than Jehovah Himself, and its tragic story none other than that of His chosen race. "The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah His pleasant plant: and He looked for justice, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry" (v. 7).

Isaiah's great message here is that privilege implies responsibility. It is the same as Amos, when he says: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth—therefore will I punish you for your iniquity." God had lavished special care on the people of Israel. "A small section of humanity had been railed off. A family had been chosen to receive every advantage which could help men to produce the proper fruit of man. Here it was to be shown that barbarism, lust and idolatry were not the true fruit of human nature, but holiness and love, purity and truth. And yet what had been the result? "He looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry."

Has that old lesson no meaning for us to-day? We too live in a land of privilege, a land whose fields are the graves of God's heroes; men who have handed down to us a heritage of civil and political freedom. If out of that, the only outcome is the wild grapes of religious indifference and careless frivolity, it may be of even worse than that, commercial dishonesty, sensuality, drunkenness, what a return is here! Brothers, your privilege measures your responsibility. Your heritage of a Christian land and Christian homes is the standard of God's expectations from you. When a man puts capital into a business, he expects a dividend. God has invested a great capital in you. He has given you a noble land, Christian homes, this church in which you sit. Some of you can recall how as children your earliest recollections circle round these sacred walls. Others were sitting with you then who are no longer with you now. Hands could be touched by you then that are vanished now. Voices joined with you in the praise of the sanctuary that are silent now. They are gone, but their memory remains. They are gone, but their faith endures, "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, to-day and for ever." Let not that faith be only a memory. Be worthy of your great part. Be what your fathers have fondly

desired you to be. Give yourselves afresh to God in renewed consecration and be not like this vineyard of the Lord, on which He had bestowed so much love and labour and to which He looked that it should bring forth good fruit, and behold it brought forth wild grapes!

II. What were these "*wild grapes*" which the prophet saw growing on the once goodly vine of Judah, instead of those generous clusters he had a right to expect? There was, in the first place, *a cruel injustice to the poor*, "He looked for judgment," better for justice, "and behold oppression."

Now there were many kinds of oppression of the poor which Isaiah condemned, but the special one he deals with here is that of the "land-grabbers," those rich men who had made a practice of buying up the land of the country and driving into the city the ancient proprietors of the soil. "Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place" (for others to live in), "that they may be settled alone in the midst of the earth!" (v. 8).

The Land Question should never have been acute in Palestine, for Moses had given particular instructions regarding it. The system was to be one of peasant proprietorship. By the law of Jubilee, if an owner was for a time dispossessed by

debt he had the inalienable right to return when the Sacred Year came on. This law, however, which is attended by serious economic difficulties, had now become "more honoured in the breach than in the observance." Large tracts of the country were falling into the hands of great proprietors.

The same has been true in our own country. Highland glens have been depopulated for sheep and game, and poor cottars are driven into the cities to deteriorate morally and physically in miserable slums. As one has said, the law of land distribution has been: "A brace of grouse to an acre, a brace of men to a garret."

The problem is indeed not so easy of solution to-day as perhaps it was. Our barren soil and inclement climate—I speak largely of Scotland—and the absence of transport, make it difficult to maintain human life now in places where under the old simple life and the less heavily taxed conditions a thrifty and godly populace could have been easily maintained.

But the condition is serious and merits the attention of all who love their country. A nation that is huddled up in great cities is a nation that cannot be strong either in soul or body. It is the country people that are the basis of its strength, and if you drive all its crofters into cities or

expatriate them to Canada or Australia, you are preparing the way for national extinction as surely, if not as quickly, as the rich Jews of old when they laid "field to field" that they might be "placed alone in the midst of the earth."

The other social evil the prophet condemns here is *the vice of Drunkenness*, and he does so in the most unmeasured terms. Temperance agitators are sometimes criticized for the extravagance of their language. Perhaps if their critics knew the full extent of the evil they condemned they would not call it extravagance. But the ebullience of their oratory, such as it is, is nothing to that of Isaiah. Listen to his words: "Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that tarry late into the night, till wine inflame them! . . . Therefore the underworld hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure . . . and their multitude shall descend into it" (v. 11, 14).

What a picture! The very mouth of Hades has to be enlarged in order to let in the multitude of Jerusalem's drunkards. We have heard of those frightful snakes, like the boa-constrictor, which after crushing a whole deer in their awful folds swallow it down in one huge mouthful. So large is its appetite that its body has to be enormously distended to receive its prey. Such a dragon,

says the prophet, is the drink fiend. To receive its victims hell needs to be enlarged.

A strong statement, and yet "when our judges tell us from the Bench that nine-tenths of pauperism and crime are caused by drink, and our physicians remind us that if irregular tippling were abolished half the current sickness of the land would cease, and our statesmen say that the ravages of strong drink are equal to war, pestilence and famine combined, surely to swallow such a glut of spoil, it is not too much to say that the very mouth of Gehenna has to be widened that its victims may descend into it" (G. A. Smith).[1]

These words were uttered before the War. Since then by High Licence, and to some extent by Prohibition, in Scotland, there has been a considerable improvement, especially amongst the working-classes. But the danger is still real, especially amongst the rich. Every year a minister has to mourn the loss of valuable members destroyed by this habit. The words of this ancient preacher of Temperance have still a solemn meaning. "Woe unto them that are mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle strong drink. . . . As the fire devoureth the stubble and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their

[1] *The Book of Isaiah*, vol. i, p. 46.

blossom shall go up" (better mildew) "as dust" (v. 22, 24).

III. And this brings us to the third part of Isaiah's Dirge of the Vineyard, *the Judgments of the Lord on Jerusalem.*

These are brought before us in a series of short pictures representing Famine, Invasion, Captivity and National Ruin. Each of these ends with the melancholy refrain: "For all this His anger is not turned away, but His hand is stretched out still."

How terribly these prophecies were to be fulfilled the long tragic story of Judaism tells. Read Milman's *History of the Jews* and you will say that Isaiah has not told half of the truth. And yet, in spite of all, she has maintained her nationality and has not been utterly extinguished as so many larger nations have been. No, as Isaiah says, "A remnant was to be saved." And why? That it might become the highway of the nations to the knowledge of God. From that hacked and dismembered vine, even when its condition seemed most desperate, a Branch was to spring up, "the stem of Jesse" was to arise and by it the salvation of the world was to be accomplished.

Nay, more. Though sharing in none of its latter glory, that Remnant of Jacob was to be preserved, throughout all the dark ages, enduring the most cruel persecutions, yet indestructible in its faith

and nationality until it was to become, as it is to-day, a powerful force in the world's policy, even menacing in its power. The Jew, it has been truly said, is the standing miracle of history, cursed, yet a blessing, destroyed yet indestructible, persecuted and yet preserved. Preserved—and for what? Why should not the explanation of St. Paul be the true one? "If the casting away of them has been the salvation of the world, what shall the bringing in of them be, but life from the dead?"

# VI

## ISAIAH AND THE MESSIANIC HOPE

Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.—ISAIAH vii. 14.

IT is the supreme glory of Isaiah that he was the first to herald the coming of the Messiah. It is true that his great contemporary, Micah, has a wonderful passage (v. 2–9) in which he describes the coming of a great deliverer in almost similar terms and even goes the length of telling where he is to be born, adding the strange and mystic words that "his goings forth are from of old, from everlasting." But it is the general view of the critics that this prophecy of Micah is of a later date than Isaiah's first Messianic utterances and points to a time when the Assyrian was already in the land. In any case, Isaiah has elaborated the conception with much greater fullness than his brother prophet. We know that the two men worked together in common; and have other resemblances, some of them quite literal in their identity. It seems therefore more

probable that the original idea came from the man who has developed it with most thoroughness and that it is to him we owe the first clear adumbration of the coming of One who was to restore the ruined fortunes of the house of Israel and establish in Jerusalem an everlasting kingdom.

We cannot, of course, tell how Isaiah first came by this great conception. There had always indeed been prevalent in the nation a conviction that the house of David was "a sure house," and that its dynasty would last for ever. This had taken rise from the very reign of David himself, when Nathan the Seer had promised to him his throne would be established for ever (2 Sam. vii. 16). But this conception of an everlasting throne is obviously something very different from the coming of a supernatural Deliverer, and yet this is evidently the thought of our prophet in his first conception of "the wonderful child." Probably it was "the darkness of the land" that in his case rang in "the Christ that is to be." Thick clouds were at the time gathering over the whole land, both Judah and Israel. The great Assyrian Empire, having conquered the East, was preparing to make her mighty spring on all the little nations on the Mediterranean seaboard. Damascus, the city which was most menaced by the

danger, had sought to evade it by linking all the lesser kingdoms together in one defensive alliance, and for this purpose had made alliance with her old inveterate foe of Samaria. Their latest move was to get Jerusalem to join with them, and when Ahaz refused to do this, they had invaded his country and were threatening to reduce the capital itself and place on its throne a creature subservient to their will.

To counteract this, Ahaz resolved on what he no doubt thought a most astute act of diplomacy;—to make peace with the threatening invader himself and by an alliance with him against Syria and Israel to be on the winning side. Now Isaiah was as true a patriot as any man; but he had no love for an alliance with Assyria. He realized that in the end of the day no good could come of a friendship like that. Besides, he believed it to be an ungodly alliance. No good could come from a confederation with a heathen power. His policy therefore was what would be described as that of a "splendid isolation." Trust in Jehovah was his counsel to king and people. Trust in Him and Him only, and in the end of the day you will find Him worth the trusting.

Now it was just here that Isaiah's Messianic hope emerged. He came to believe—how he did so we are not told, but it must have been through

the direct inspiration of the Almighty—that a Deliverer would arise who would deliver his people from all their foes and establish an everlasting kingdom in Jerusalem.

In the seventh chapter of his prophecy, there is an account given of a dramatic interview between the king and prophet in which this Messianic Hope is first divulged. The prophet had gone to meet the king, who was engaged in examining the water supply of the city, in view doubtless of the impending siege of the city by Pekah, the king of Israel, and Rezin, the king of Damascus, who had already conquered all the northern part of the land and were preparing to invest the capital. We see Isaiah beginning the interview by offering to give Ahaz a sign from Heaven, so sure and miraculous, that he could no longer deny the prophet's divine authority in his message of the promised deliverance of his people if they would only trust in God alone. But the king has already made up his mind, and he is in no mood to accept Isaiah's interference. "I will not ask for any sign," he testily replies, "neither will I tempt the Lord." There was an apparent religiousness in his answer, for undoubtedly the desire to seek for signs and wonders was never regarded by the best minds of the Bible as a mark of the highest faith. "An evil and adulterous

generation," said Christ, "seeketh a sign; and there shall no sign be given to it."

But there are occasions when this general rule has its exceptions. Moses was given a sign to convince Pharaoh. Gideon received a sign when he went forth to the battle with the Midianites. And this occasion is one of these. "If you will not ask a sign," says Isaiah, "the Lord will give you one unasked." "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. Butter and honey shall he eat, when he knoweth to refuse the evil, and choose the good. For before the child shall know to refuse the evil, and choose the good, the land whose two kings thou abhorrest shall be forsaken of both her kings" (Isa. vii. 14–17, R.V.).

Now the question here is, what exactly is the sign that the prophet means to give to Ahaz? It is the contention of some modern critics, that the importance of the sign lies not in its wondrous birth but in the food on which the child is to be nurtured till it reaches the age of manhood. In support of this, they lay great stress on the fact that the Hebrew word for "virgin" is not one which the writer would have employed had the idea of a virgin birth been intended. They hold, therefore, that the words simply mean that some young woman, then unmarried, would in the near

future bear a child by the natural means of conception, whose food for many years would be that of an uncultivated land, milk-curd and wild honey.

But it must surely be felt, by the most unprejudiced, that this is no sign at all worthy of the great occasion, and commensurate with the solemn way in which Isaiah announces it. It could be of no value to Ahaz in his present distracted condition, since its fulfilment, such as it was, lay in the dim and distant future. Moreover if the sign was merely to consist in the future devastation of Israel and Syria, why bring in this cumbrous machinery of a child at all? Why not simply say, "The land of Israel and the land of Damascus will shortly be overrun by Assyria." Above all, why bring in this Child with such a wondrous name? "Immanuel! God with us!" Surely to say that this child is not himself the sign, but the "butter and honey" which he eats, is one of the most extraordinary perversities of criticism that prejudice has ever perpetrated.

That this child is to be a "wonderful" child is clearly brought out in Isaiah's after-references to him. He speaks of the whole country afterwards as "Immanuel's land" and in a later prophecy says: "His name shall be called wonderful, counseller, the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace."

We make no doubt, therefore, that when Isaiah said, "A virgin shall conceive, and bear a son," he meant a miraculous conception. It is true that the word "virgin" should rather be rendered "maiden" or "damsel"; but it is one, nevertheless, which is always associated in Scripture with unmarried women and, what is perhaps more significant still, it is so understood by the Translators of the Septuagint, who may be supposed to have understood the meaning of their own tongue better than any modern scholar. When the author of the first Gospel saw in these words a prophecy of the Virgin Birth of our Lord, he was only following in the footsteps of those who had seen the same two hundred years before him.

No doubt such "a sign" must have seemed wonderful to Isaiah; but we must remember it would not be so impossible to him as to the modern mind. The idea of the divine immanence in human life was one familiar to the pantheistic religions of ancient times and it was often associated with Incarnations like those of Apollo and Osiris. These incarnations were, however, always more or less associated with an unclean mythology. What is remarkable about Isaiah's conception is that the transcendence and holiness of God are everywhere preserved and that the coming of the Infant Messiah is enshrined in a

reverence and purity to which heathen conceptions present no parallel.

It is needless to say that this hope of Isaiah was not fulfilled as the prophet expected it. He evidently expected the Messiah to be born immediately. Indeed in the ninth chapter he speaks as if that hope had been already realized. "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given." Apparently he had no knowledge as to where the Child was. He would probably have discouraged any attempts to seek Him out, if he did know; but he has no doubt that at the proper hour of his country's need, He will arise as her deliverer and the establisher of David's throne forever. "The zeal of the Lord will perform this."

Now, in this form his visions were never realized. The danger and devastation of his country, foretold to Ahaz, did indeed take place. For a time indeed all seemed well. Jerusalem was saved from her immediate peril by Assyria's help, and those two smoking firebrands, Pekah and Rezin, soon went out, leaving a nauseous reek of their countries' desolation behind.

Nevertheless the alliance with Assyria proved a perilous one, and though, after it was established, Isaiah loyally supported it as the only wise thing now to do, the time came when it was impossible to maintain it any longer. "The Assyrian came

down like a wolf on the fold." Rabshakeh with his army and insults were at the gates. Then surely, it might have been thought, was the time for the Messiah to appear. But it was not so. Jerusalem was saved, but not by any earthly arm. The only "man" then who was a hiding-place from the tempest was the prophet himself with his splendid faith in Jehovah alone. "Your strength," he cried, "is to sit still. Answer him not a word. Trust in God alone." And so it fell out. "That night the angel of the Lord went forth into the camp of the Assyrians and slew 185,000 of them, and when they arose in the morning, behold they were all dead men." God had preserved Jerusalem inviolate, but where was Immanuel all this time? When the shadow of the eagle was over Immanuel's land, why did He not appear?

These were questions which I daresay Isaiah often put to himself. But if he did so, he found an answer in one of his great texts: "He that believeth shall not make haste." The fulfilment of his prophetic hopes would come one day. Other eyes, if not his, would "see the King in His beauty."

That this is so we learn from the further reference made to the Messiah in chapter xi., a prophecy dating thirty years after his first concep-

tions of the wonderful Child. In this prophecy we have the full spiritual development of Isaiah's youthful dreams. It comes as the conclusion of his magnificent description of the destruction of Sennacherib at the very gates of Zion in chapter x. Painting the advancing armies of Assyria under the bold image of a forest of cedars, advancing to their prey with decision in their faces, he suddenly closes with a crash of doom: "Behold Jehovah, the Lord of hosts, shall cut off the branch with His terror and the mighty trunks shall reel and the lofty trees shall be brought low; for the forest of Lebanon shall fall by a mighty Hand!" (x. 33, 34).

It is after this glorious vindication of Isaiah's faith that the prophet inaugurates his new programme of the Messianic kingdom. The downfall of Assyria is the beginning of a new era for Judah. The House of Jesse, though now cut down to little more than a stump, has not lost its recuperative power. There shall emerge from its ancient root, as is seen so often in trees cut down, a new *Branch* or rather Shoot which shall grow into a Tree more glorious than the first. This will be the coming Messianic King, who is described under ideal colours. "The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and of

might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord." Under his just and benign rule prosperity shall return to the nation. The dispersed captives of the Northern Kingdom will be brought back and laying aside their former jealousies shall worship together as in ancient days in the shrine of Solomon. Nor will the blessing be confined to Israel. The Gentiles also shall be included in it. They shall come to Zion to share in the "rest" of the people of God. Nay, even the beasts of the field shall lay aside their enmities. A millennial peace will reign over all things. "The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." With this glorious picture in his eye, the prophet breaks forth into song: "Cry out and shout, O inhabitant of Zion: for great is the Holy One in the midst of Thee" (xii. 6).

Thus the Messianic Hopes of the Prophet suffered no diminution through their apparent non-fulfilment. On the contrary, they were deepened and purified and became in future ages the greatest spiritual heritage he had to leave to his people. In after days when the fortunes of Judah's Kingdom sank very low, this faith in a "Branch" out of the Stem of Jesse kept the nation's heart still beating with hope and became the secret of her indestructible faith and courage.

The prophecy, indeed, was never fulfilled quite as Isaiah expected. No ideal king, says Dr. Driver, ever again sat on the throne of David; nor did Jerusalem's hope save her in the evil day when Titus and his armies surrounded the doomed city; but in a deeper sense and a grander it was fulfilled on the night when the Angels sang their anthem over the fields of Bethlehem, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace and good-will to men," "for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."

# VII

## NAHUM: THE PROPHET OF CONSOLATION

The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; and he knoweth them that trust in Him.—NAHUM i. 7.

THE word "Nahum" means "the consoler." Possibly it was given him by his parents in some time of trial, meaning thereby that God was to comfort their hearts by the child He had bestowed. So at least it fell out. Nahum was indeed a great consoler; but not in the ordinary way. It is *the comfort of retribution* that he tells us of, in this fierce little book. His message is a wild cry of vengeance upon the oppressors of his people. It is an exultant shout of triumph over their speedy downfall and destruction. So fierce is its outlook that some have wondered whether Nahum was a true prophet at all; or only an Old Testament Jingo, singing "a hymn of hate," with as little pity in it as the cruelties he reprobates. "Nahum," says Sir George Adam Smith, "is a better poet than a prophet." Alone among the preachers of the Old Testament he has not a

word to say about the sins of his own nation. His one thought is the doom of the foreigner. "O city soaked with blood," he cries, "you are shattered past repair, wounded to the death. All who are told about you clap their hands over you. For whom have you not wronged unceasingly?" [1]

This is hardly fair to the prophet, however. Nahum has other elements, as our text proves. "The Lord is good," he reminds us here, "a stronghold in the day of trouble." But his main function was of a different order. It was to reinforce men's faith by a vindication of Jehovah as the avenger of His people, as the punisher of their oppressors.

Who were those against whom he launches his fierce invectives? It was the Assyrians, perhaps the cruellest of all the great empires of antiquity. "The Assyrian annals," says Prof. Sayce, "glory in their record of a ferocity at which we stand aghast." It was the abominable invention of this nation to deport their conquered peoples to lands far away, in order to prevent them ever again rising against their conquerors.

Shortly before this Assyria had conquered Egypt, and the prophet recalls the cruelties she had perpetrated on the ancient city of Thebes—or No-ammon as he calls it. He describes the

[1] Nahum iii. 1, 19 (Moffatt's Translation).

hideous massacre which had attended it; the "children dashed upon the streets," the nobles marched away "in chains."

Among such exiles, Nahum's family was probably one, carried away from Galilee by Shalmanezer many years before this. We do not know, indeed, where he was born. He is called an "Elkoshite"; but the town to which he is said to belong is difficult to place. Identifications of it have been made both in Galilee and in Judah, as well as in Mesopotamia, where an old mosque is still pointed out as his sepulchre. This mosque is indeed quite a recent structure, but it may enshrine an old tradition. Apart from that there is a vividness in Nahum's descriptions and a graphic power in his battle scenes, which reads like the story of an eye-witness. Probably Nahum wrote his little book not many years before the conquest of Assyria by the combined forces of Media and Babylonia. He had seen the "red cohorts" of the advancing Medes as they besieged city after city in the broad plains of Mesopotamia until at last they encircled Nineveh itself.

The struggle must have been long and desperate, for the Assyrian soldiers were amongst the best in the world. There would be many a time when the hopes of the exiles would die within them. But Nahum had no doubts. He always

looks forward to a triumph that is to be absolute. Nineveh is to become "a heap of ruins." She is to pass away for ever.

Shortly before the end he seems to have fled to Judea, set free probably by the advance of the Medes; for it is to her as well as to his Northern compatriots that he addresses his message of deliverance. "Look," he cries, "there are the messengers' feet on the hills! Good news and the tidings of peace! Hold festival, Judah; now do what you had vowed. For never again will the villain invade you. He is finished and done with. But the Eternal restores the vine of Jacob, as the vine of Israel, that the plunderers plundered, breaking down their branches."[1] A few years later, the prophecy was fulfilled. Nineveh had been besieged for two years, but with her mighty fortifications she easily defied the feeble artillery of that day. Under heavy rains, however, the Tigris rose to an unusual height. Those foundations of the walls which abutted on the river gave way in the night and the armies of the Medes poured through the breach like a cataract. In the prophet's vivid language, their chariots "roared in the streets. They justled in the broad ways,"[2] dashing on to the great citadel in

[1] Nahum i. 15–ii. 2 (Moffatt's Translation).
[2] Nahum ii. 4.

the centre of the city. But before they reached it, it was in flames. The king and his nobles, knowing what was before them, had resolved on a great act of self-immolation. In blood and flame great Nineveh passed away for ever!

Such was the scenery that enshrined and inspired Nahum's prophecy. Its splendid poetry, its comfort and the striking way in which it was fulfilled secured its immortality and gave its author a place among the lesser prophets, as a true "consoler" of his people. By the doom of Nineveh he taught men to see, in letters of lightning flashed on an ebon sky, the words "*God is just.*" There is a "power in the world making for righteousness." We need indeed often to look long ere we can see it. "The wheels of God grind slowly," yet in the end they grind "exceeding small." Sin is a principle of self-annihilation. Evil contains within itself the seeds of inevitable decay. Only goodness lasts. Only love is eternal because "love is of God, and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, for God is love."

This is the beautiful message Nahum proclaims in our text: "*The Lord is good. He is a refuge in the day of trouble; and He knoweth them that trust in Him.*" These words are, as one has said, among the most beautiful in the Bible, and they are all the more beautiful because of the grim

environment in which they are found. They come upon the reader like a burst of sunshine in a cloudy day.

I. The first principle they lay down is the great ethical postulate of the Old Testament, *that God is good.* One of the Psalmists had stated that before; but then he had limited it somewhat in its sweep. "Truly God is good to Israel," he had said, "*and to such as are of a clean heart.*" But Nahum makes no such limitation. "God is good," he proclaims, thus abolishing the unclean deities of heathen mythologies as nonentities, creations of the imagination, that have no other reality than the evil heart of man. God is not like that; "God is good."

To us who live under the light of the Christian revelation, this seems a commonplace. We have been taught from our earliest years that God is love. But it was not so to the prophet. Living in an age of cruelty and rapine, seeing the wicked triumph, watching the glory of the Assyrian conqueror as he strode over the world, leaving misery and death behind him, it was hard to believe that God was good, that the power at the heart of things was a benignant power, that the "all-knowing" and the "all-powerful" was the "all-loving" too.

Even in our own happier days, we know that

there are times, such as those awful years from 1914 to 1918, when it is hard to see that God is good. When calamity smites us with blinding blows and we sit by our desolate fireside, when sickness lays us low in the very middle of our hopes and plannings, when disappointment and disillusion mock our hopes, when "all that life seemed meant for fails," then it is hard to believe that "God is good."

It is the glory of Nahum that in an age of travail and sorrow such as his nation had never known, in an age when his homestead perhaps in far-off Galilee was ruined and lost, he was able to say, "God is good." And to be able to say it, in like circumstances; to hold on to this cardinal article of the Christian creed, this is surely the foundation of all things. As "Tess" says in Barrie's romance, "When a body's sure of that, he's sure of a'."

II. This brings us to the second thought in Nahum's great message of consolation, *the spiritual defence which such a faith imparts to him who possesses it.* "He is," continues Nahum, "a stronghold in the day of trouble."

Life is not all made up of summer days. There come days of wintry experience, when we need such a defence, if ever we are to weather life's storms without disaster or disgrace. When I was a minister at Aberdeen I used sometimes to go

down to the harbour and walk out along the great breakwaters, which on either side of the river reach out their long arms into the North Sea. These great bastions of stone and iron went far out into the foaming waves. No merchandise was ever discharged at their ends and one not used to the vicissitudes of a North-Eastern coast might on a bright summer day wonder what they were there for. But see that pier on a wild winter's day when a "Nor'-easter" is blowing half a gale and great billows are thundering down upon it and you will know why it is made! Watch yonder trawler as she makes for refuge to the harbour. See how she is tossed like a cockleshell on the water, a sheet of spray almost obliterating her at times from view. "Will she be able to make the port?" is the anxious question of the spectators on the beach, and the still more anxious one of those on board. At length she draws near the critical point, skilfully steered by the man at the wheel. There is a minute of silent, tense expectation as she comes to the mouth of the river and a great sea smites her and seems to sweep her past the pier-head. But she shakes herself free, turns her head to the storm and in a moment more she is safely in between the encircling arms. A great cheer bursts from the crowd. She is safe now! No wave can reach her that has not first

had its fury broken by that barrier of steel and stone which lies between her and it. You see the value of these long encircling arms of stone now. They are the arms of salvation in a "day of trouble."

And such an arm is this assurance that "God is good" to the soul sorely bested in the dark days of life. "Be thou our arm every morning," says another prophet, "our salvation also in the time of trouble." And Nahum answers that prayer with an everlasting yes. The Lord is good. "He is a stronghold in the day of trouble."

Without that arm to protect how many of us would go down, alas! how many do go down into the depths of Atheism or blank despair, as we have known some do; or, worse still, into the whirlpool of sensuality and shame, without hope because without God in the world.

III. How, then, shall we reach such an anchorage of salvation in our "day of trouble"? The answer is by simple trust. "He knoweth," says the prophet, "them that trust in him."

"He knoweth"—the word means "knows with love and solicitude." It is the knowledge of which the Psalmist speaks when he says, "What is man, that thou *takest knowledge* of him? Or the son of man, that thou takest account of him?" It is a gracious, loving, caring knowledge, and so

Dr. Moffatt translates it. "He careth for them that trust in Him." God cares for all His creatures; but He has a special loving care for those who trust in Him. Faith is here, as elsewhere in the Bible, the great condition of entering into the riches of God's love and grace. "He careth for those that trust in Him."

How, then, shall such a trust become ours? The prophet came to this through the pathway of a great experience—the experience of God in History stepping forth on behalf of His people to deliver them. Such a cosmic revelation of God may not be ours. But there are other experiences in the individual life that come to us all. The bush still burns with fire to the seeking, expectant soul. God comes to us still, though not in earthly fire. He speaks to us to-day, though not with human voice. He comes to us in the monitions of conscience. He speaks to us in the still small voice of Love, in the voice of Christ.

That is our vision of God—something better far than the red cohorts of the Medes treading down the enemy in the mire of the blood-stained street. No, the revelation of a God who "when He suffered threatened not; when He was reviled, reviled not again but committed His soul unto Him that judgeth righteously."

Have you come to know this God as He is revealed in Christ? Have you put your hand into the wounded hand of Him Who died for you in pledge of an eternal covenant? Then you will know all the peace and assurance that Nahum knew, aye and far more than he knew; when to that storm-tossed people of his long ago he uttered these words of sweet assurance, "The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble, and He knoweth them that trust in Him."

# VIII

## ZEPHANIAH: THE PROPHET OF RETRIBUTION

It shall come to pass at that time that I will search Jerusalem with candles; and I will punish the men that are settled on their lees, that say in their heart, The Lord will not do good, neither will He do evil.—ZEPHANIAH i. 12.

ZEPHANIAH is the prophet of universal judgment. Like Van Tromp, the Dutch Admiral who carried a broomstick at his mast-head, as a symbol of the clean sweep he had made of his enemies, so his brief prophecy sweeps the entire world with its menace. "I will make a clean sweep of the earth," he begins, "a clean sweep of man and beast."[1] Countries so diverse as Philistia and Assyria, peoples so far apart as the Ammonites and the Egyptians are united in his indignation, and he sums up his message of doom by announcing a day when the Lord will summon before Him all nations that He may pour upon them His "fierce anger: for all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of My jealousy."[2]

[1] Zephaniah i. 2 and 3 (Moffatt's Translation). [2] iii. 8.

We do not know exactly how Zephaniah came by this awful message. It is said that an invasion of the Scythians which, according to Herodotus, devastated the Eastern world for some thirty years during the time of his prophecy, may have suggested it to him. But it may simply have been his conception of sin as a world-wide disease, the vision of an earth that had forgotten and profaned its Maker, that suggested these winged words. In any case he lives in history as the great herald of judgment, and it is to his vivid imagery that the great hymn of the Middle Ages owes its birth:

"Dies irae! Dies illa
Solvet saeclum in favilla."

But although the prophet includes in his message a universality of judgment it is with Judea and Jerusalem he begins, and it is in vivid and arresting language that he describes her sin. "It shall come to pass at that time that I will search Jerusalem with candles; and I will punish the men that are settled on their lees, that say in their heart, The Lord will not do good, neither will He do evil."

It is told of Diogenes, the Greek philosopher, that he was once seen going about the streets of Athens in broad daylight, with a lantern in his hand, and on being asked what he was doing, replied, "I am searching for an honest man."

Jehovah's search is of a different kind. He is seeking for an evil man, and in the opinion of the prophet he will not need to go far to find one. There would seem to be so many wicked men in Jerusalem that there would seem to be little need to search them out with candles; but doubtless the prophet uses the figure to indicate how keen the divine scrutiny will be. None will be able to evade the gleam of that all-searching eye.

The prophet perhaps also uses the parable to indicate the kind of men God is searching for. It is not open sinners, whose iniquity advertises itself on the skies. It is men who are suffering from a more subtle spiritual disease—"the men that are settled on their lees."

What does the figure mean? It is taken from the manufacture of wine. After the pulp is expressed from the berry it is left to settle in the wine-vat, in order that the sediment or lees may sink to the bottom. When this is done, it is emptied into another vessel and again into a third or fourth until by successive decantations the taste of the lees is extracted from the juice and it becomes pure and sparkling wine.

So is it with the manufacture of men. God has set our life in a cycle of continuous change because without it our tastes would not be refined and we would degenerate into earthly and sensual

and unspiritual men, "men that are settled on their lees."

We see the value of change even in our physical life. There are but few to-day who do not feel the necessity of "taking a change" for the sake of their bodily health. The city toiler would not think his life complete, if he did not have his annual change to the sea-shore or mountain glen. There are some indeed who think that this universal desire for change to-day is an unhealthy feature of our modern life. "A rolling-stone," they say, "gathers no moss," and in this ceaseless movement, they detect a lack of stability, such as made our fathers the men they were. But for my part I do not agree with them. Restlessness is one thing: love of change quite another. God loves change. The world is ever changing. As Spenser says:

"All that moveth doth in change delight."

The sky is ever changing. The clouds are ever assuming new and more fantastic forms. The sea is ever changing. A thousand tides and ten thousand waves are ever sweeping over its changeful bosom. The earth is ever changing. The death of Winter passes into the flowers of Spring. The glory of Summer mellows into the maturity of Autumn.

And shall we say that what is good for Nature is not good for Nature's highest work? You say, "A rolling stone gathers no moss"; but who wants to gather moss? If you wish to be an old moss-covered boulder you should go to the graveyard where the dead are lying; but for my part I had rather be the rock which the torrent detaches from its mountain bed and, dashing down against cliff and boulder, bears on at last to the seashore, there to be polished clean and pure, there to be smoothed into a perfect oval by the glorious carving of Nature's hand.

That is what God wants men to be; not moss-covered boulders, covered with the accretions of material wealth, but polished stones to decorate His palace. And change is the method by which He does that. Change is the chisel by which He carves us into the image of "the perfect man." And so what is true of Nature is not less true of man. God has made our life one of gradual but constant change. Speaking generally, there are four great changes in human life—Childhood, Youth, Manhood and Old Age. And these periodic changes are coincident with great changes in the spiritual life within, changes which are caused by the vicissitudes and trials which accompany and are often caused by these outward changes.

But there are some men who do not respond to

these outward changes. As the Psalmist says, "They have no changes." They have no trials in their life, or if they have they make but little impression upon them. They have an easy way carved out to fortune by their parents, and the prosperity they inherit follows them all their days. All they touch seems to turn to gold. Men call them the favourites of fortune. "They are not tried like other men." They have no changes.

Are they, therefore, to be envied? No: if the prophet Jeremiah is to be believed. Speaking of Moab and using this same figure, he says of him: "Moab hath been at ease from his youth. He hath not been emptied from vessel to vessel. Therefore his taste remaineth in him and his scent is not changed." It is just the same thought as Zephaniah's when he speaks of "the men that are settled on their lees." These favourites of fortune have lost the greatest fortune of all. They have lost God. They have become fat and gross and sensual. They have lost all touch with spiritual realities. They are men "who say in their heart, The Lord will not do good, neither will He do evil."

The condition here described is one of Moral Atheism. These men are not dogmatic atheists. There is no such thing as dogmatic atheism in the Bible. It is only the fool "who says in his heart, There is no God." But though these men

do not deny God in their creed, their lives deny Him. They say of Him, "He does not do good, neither does He do evil." That is to say, He neither does good to the good, nor evil to the evil. In other words, He is a God that as Carlyle once said, when his wife was lying dead before him, "does nothing." We may as well treat Him as non-existent. He is a factor that does not count in human life.

This is a creed which is by no means confined to the age of Zephaniah. There are multitudes to-day who are practically of this way of thinking. With some it is a moral pessimism, begotten by some bewildering trial which has come to them they know not why. God, they say, does not do good to "those that be good"; else why this sorrow in my life? With the majority, however, it is the fruit of an easy life. Like Moab they have had no changes in their life, and so fear not God. They sink into an easy optimism which puts God far away from their life. They live for pleasure and self. God is not in all their thoughts.

Such a moral Atheism is more insulting to God and more dangerous to its possessor than the open atheism of the unbeliever and the scoffer. It is more insulting to God because what conception of the Most High can be more unworthy than that of a God Who is Himself settled on His lees,

Who takes no interest in moral issues and like an absentee landlord allows the world to go to wrack and ruin without even a thought of its condition? It is also more dangerous, because dogmatic atheism at least implies an awakened conscience and an intellectual discontent, and you can get at it better than that easy type of latitudinarian indifference which says of God, "He does not do good, neither does He do evil."

How is such a spiritual condition to be cured? Its victims must be shaken up. They must be stirred from their rancid condition of moral and spiritual inertia. They must be shaken out of their lees. And it is this, says Zephaniah, that God is going to do. "I will punish the men that are settled on their lees." I will make them feel that sin is a reality. I will show them whether I am a God that neither does good nor evil. A "day of wrath" is coming, when men will realize that there is a God in the deepest recesses of their being. That day shall be "a day of trouble and distress, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness. . . . And I will bring distress upon men, and they shall walk like blind men, because they have sinned against the Lord: and their blood shall be poured as dust, and their flesh as the dung."[1]

[1] i. 15–17.

Do we smile at such fierce words to-day? Do we settle back comfortably into our easy chairs and say, "The ravings of a lunatic out of Bedlam"? We should not do so. We have only to open our newspapers to see that sin is a terrible reality still, that it is an evil thing and a bitter to forsake the living God. All the world over to-day there are homes and hearts which are desolate because of those who said to themselves in life's gay morn, "The Lord will not do good, neither will He do evil." There is no more fatal deity for any man to worship than an Absentee God.

What is the practical lesson which Zephaniah would leave with us from his stern prophecy? It is, strange to say, not one of judgment, but one of gracious love and tender mercy. The dark thundercloud burst at last into the gentle rain of a compassionate God Who weeps for His children as Jesus wept of old over the sinners of Jerusalem and promises them a gracious and abundant forgiveness, if they return in penitence to Him Whom they have so long disregarded. "In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not; and to Zion, Let not thine hands be slack. The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty. He will save. He will

rejoice over thee with joy, He will rest in His love; He will joy over thee with singing."[1]

Judgment is not Zephaniah's last word. With him "Mercy rejoiceth against judgment." Only the message of judgment must be responded to. The men that are settling on their lees must be shaken up; else the result can only be in the end what Ruskin calls the saddest thing in human life, "wasted suffering," "sorrow which worketh death," the shaking of the lees of life by trial which leads to no purifying of the wine of life but only a settling back into the old dull depths of a sullen despair or a reckless dissipation.

We have recently been observing the centenary[2] of one of the noblest women of the nineteenth century, Mrs. Josephine Butler. Her life presents a signal instance of how a soul was stirred to nobler issues by one of those divine changes which are not suffered to pass unused, but become the call to a life of noble service to one's fellowmen. Cradled in one of the happiest and most cultured homes of England, and married to an Oxford scholar, life lay before her with every promise of cultured ease and leisured enjoyment.

Suddenly, says one, "came the shattering blow, when all the beauty of her world was changed to ashes, when the Butlers returned from the

[1] iii. 16, 17.

[2] Written in 1928.

Continent and an excited little daughter lost her balance on a banister" and fell to a terrible death. It was a tragic welcome home. "Never," said Josephine Butler, "can I lose that memory, the fall, the sudden cry, and then the silence! Would to God that I had died that death for her!"

"When the first power of the shock had been overcome, a spiritual triumph remained to be won. The period which succeeds such a blow is always critical and testing. Some turn in upon themselves in bitterness, while others indulge the desperate expedient of trying to forget. Few find the way of that wisdom, which finally gives peace."

Being bereft of her own daughter, Josephine Butler went out to find other daughters, and she went to those the world calls "lost." She decided that only one way of self-mastery was possible, to satisfy the irresistible desire which now possessed her—"to find some other pain keener than my own, to meet people more unhappy than myself."

This was her prayer in these great moments: "Lord, Thou hast impoverished. Do Thou make rich. Thou didst require us to give up our treasure. Do Thou now give us what we ask, spiritual life for ourselves and the world."

Strong in the power of this prayer, she went

forth on her great quest of souls more "sorrowful than her own," and in saving others found salvation to herself. And if these words should come to hearts that have recently been emptied from the vessel of happiness and ease into a bitter gulf of woe and desolating bereavement, the message which our old prophet would leave with us is to see in this dislodgment and detachment no ruthless hand of the despoiler but the call of a God of love to higher and richer experiences than the soul could reach without them. "Lord, Thou hast impoverished me. Do Thou make me rich. Thou hast taken away. Do Thou give me back." "At that time I will bring you again. . . . I will make you a name among all people of the earth, when I turn back your captivity before your eyes, saith the Lord."

# IX

## JEREMIAH: THE RELUCTANT PROPHET.—(I) THE CALL TO THE MINISTRY

Ah, Lord God! behold, I cannot speak, for I am a child. But the Lord said unto me, Say not, I am a child . . . for, behold, I have made thee this day an iron pillar.—JEREMIAH i. 6, 7, 18.

IT has been truly said that among all the prophets there is none so reluctant as Jeremiah. While the spirit of Isaiah is one of radiant readiness—"Here am I, send me"—Jeremiah is like a timid child, shrinking from the face of a stranger. Yet in the end none is more bold. For forty years he stood out unflinching, facing every kind of hostility, isolation, contempt, cruel persecution and, if tradition is true, the death of martyrdom. It is this combination of weakness and strength that makes him at once so great and so interesting. It was this that led men of a later day to see in him a likeness to Jesus. "Some say thou art Elias, *but others Jeremias.*" It was a true identification. Like Christ he unites in his

personality at once the tenderness of woman and the strength of man. He is now "the lamb of God," led, as he once said of himself, "like a sheep to the slaughter," and again "the Lion of the tribe of Judah." He is in one chapter the man whose "eyes are as a fountain of tears," and in another the prophet whose attitude is that of "an Iron Pillar."

In this chapter we are told the story of his "Call." Every great life has in it the sense of vocation. We may not have the vision of a prophet, but we should all feel we are doing the work God has called us to do. We see here how Jeremiah came to have this feeling. It is a fine story, presenting us with *the Transformation of a child into an Iron Pillar.*

What were the things that made the young priest of Anathoth draw back from the divine behest to be His messenger to an evil and adulterous generation?

Doubtless the first was the same as had staggered the far readier and radiant Isaiah, when God had called him to the ministry. *It was the tragic message of doom which God had put into his lips to deliver.* Preaching is a pleasant thing when we have pleasant things to say and can speak them with eloquence and a crowd-drawing popularity. It is very different when it means

denunciation and rebuke and even doom. And yet the true preacher must be prepared to do that sometimes. The preacher who has never offended man is one who has often offended God. "Woe unto you when all men speak well of you."

But what most preachers are called on to do only sometimes, Jeremiah was called on to do almost all the time. Of course it would be wrong to say there was no optimism in his message at all. No man can be a true preacher of God without being a preacher of "hope, in the latter end." But to Jeremiah it would appear that this latter end was beyond the horizon of his own generation. He was "to build and to plant," but he was first "to root out and to pull down and to destroy and to throw down," and not until this was accomplished to the very last letter of its reverberating doom would "the hope that was in her end" be realized by Israel and the New Covenant be made between God and His repentant people. So long as Jerusalem was a nation under her present rulers, so long must she lie under the shadow of Doom. That was the terrible message Jeremiah had to deliver, and no wonder he shrank from it saying, "Ah, no, Lord! I am a child."

For that was the second reason which made Jeremiah unwilling to assume the garb of a pro-

phet, his *mental and moral sensitiveness*. People vary much in their sensitiveness. Some men have the mental cuticle of a rhinoceros. They can stand up to opposition with a fierce delight. Such are Knox and Wesley, and such probably was Isaiah, his great predecessor. But others are as sensitive as that plant which is said to curl up its leaves to a ball at the slightest touch of its feathery fronds. Now Jeremiah was one of these Sensitive Plants. He keenly felt opposition and unpopularity.

No doubt it was his youth which partly made him so. "Ah! Lord, I am a child." He was only about twenty-five when God called him to his tremendous task. Young men are often very sensitive, especially to ridicule. To upset a plate at a social function will cause them to endure the agonies of the lost. To be dressed differently from their neighbours will make them uncomfortable all the evening.

But in addition, Jeremiah was naturally sensitive. He is, as I have said, the most womanly of all the prophets. He bitterly feels his isolation. "Woe is me," he once cries in imagination to his mother, "that thou hast borne me, a man of strife. I have neither lent on usury, nor have men lent to me in usury. Yet every one doth curse me." No wonder, I say, that Jeremiah feared to accept

his unwelcome task. And yet more wonderful still, having taken it up he endured to the end. Was he not a brave man? There were times when he felt a keen longing to throw the burden down. "Oh!" he once cried, "that I had a lodge in the wilderness, that I might leave my people, for they are all adulterers." Yet in spite of these moments of depression, he never gave in, he held on to the end. Yes, he was one of the bravest men that ever lived just because he was naturally so timid. For, as Stevenson says: "To be feared to do a thing and yet to do the thing—that is what makes the pretty man." To all of us, who are tempted at times to give up our task, Jeremiah says: Be brave! As a great Scotsman once said to a timid preacher: "Be bold! Scotland loves courage."

Once more Jeremiah *was painfully conscious of the insufficiency of his gifts*. "I cannot speak," he said to God. To a certain extent it was true. Although at times he rises to great poetic heights in his prophecy, he is not equal to Isaiah or Amos, his predecessors, in the splendour of their style. The opening chapters of his prophecy are full of doleful lamentations and melancholy cadences, which make them difficult to read. It is the biographical and still more the autobiographical elements of his prophecy that have the most

interest. And yet, in spite of that, he made a profound impression not only on his own age but on the succeeding ages by his words. The profound spirituality of his teaching brings him nearer to Christ than all the other prophets of the Old Testament. "Jeremiah," says Dr. Denney, "is the most Christian of all the prophets."

The most effective workers for God have frequently little eloquence. Wesley was not to be compared to Whitfield as an orator. Moody was not a patch on Henry Ward Beecher, and yet Wesley and Moody did greater works for God than their compeers, great as they were. It is grace that tells, not gifts. Consecration of our talents is the pathway to multiplication of our usefulness. Bring but five loaves to Jesus and He will use them to feed the multitudes.

Let us now consider how God cured the timidity of Jeremiah and made of the child "an Iron Pillar."

First of all *He gave him an overpowering sense of a Divine Call* that burned like a fire in his bones and would not let him rest. "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations" (i. 5). God makes the prophet to feel that He has predestined him to this work from his

mother's womb. How He did so, we are not told. It may have been some circumstance in his early life, a godly mother or a noble father or some trial connected with his birth that led his parents to consecrate him to the ministry from the time he came into the world. But at all events it was so. He had been set apart like Samuel to be the Lord's. Jeremiah feels he cannot go back on that early consecration. It is his duty to obey the call which thus came to him at his very cradle.

And yet there was more in it than that. It was not merely that his parents may have consecrated him to this work. He feels that God has predestined him to it. Just as a poet feels he was born to be a poet and an artist feels he was born to be an artist, so Jeremiah feels he was born to be a prophet and can be nothing else. The fire is in his bones. He cannot forbear. He must speak what God has told him to speak. "I ordained thee to be a prophet of the Lord."

Then, further, *God equipped him with a message.* "I will put My words into thy mouth," He said, and as He did so He touched his lips and opened his mouth with a power and courage and freshness, which made this child one of the great original forces in the development of Hebrew Ideals. "For the first time in prophecy," says

A. B. Davidson, "the heart comes into prominence." He lived at an age of great ecclesiastical revival, when, under Josiah, the "High Places" were done away and the doctrine of one central sanctuary at Jerusalem became of supreme importance in the nation s eye. Jeremiah does not oppose these things. On the contrary he seems to have approved them at first.[1] But as he grew older he saw they were superficial. "Plough up your fallow ground and sow not among thorns," he said to men who made much of the Temple and the Ark of the Covenant. The days are coming when men shall no more speak of the "Temple of the Lord," for "I will make a new Covenant with them, saith the Lord. I will write My law in their hearts."[2]

Jeremiah is a great revolutionary. He brings men to the religion of the heart, and it was with a true insight that when Jesus instituted the Holy Supper He went back to Jeremiah. "This is the New Covenant in My blood which is shed for the remission of sins."

When God calls us to a great work, He will give us the means to do it. God is perhaps calling some of you to a task which seems too great for

[1] See Driver, *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament.*

[2] vii. 4 and xxxi. 31–34.

you; but if you only have faith and go forth to fulfil His commission He will not fail you. He did not fail Jeremiah. We have seen that he had hours of deep depression. Yet he had hours also of greater joy. "Thy word was unto me," he cries, "the joy and rejoicing of my heart."[1]

Last of all God gave the timid child *a wonderful and two-fold sign of the reality* of his experience. He showed him first *a Blossoming Branch of the Almond Tree*. The almond is the snowdrop of Palestine. Its white bloom appears when there is not a leaf on any other tree. Hence it is poetically called "The Awakener" of the year. It heralds the awakening of Spring. By this vision of the blossoming almond, therefore, God tells the prophet that He, too, is awake and that right early will He fulfil the word which He is to put into His servant's mouth.

What that word is to be, we see from the *Second vision*. A great boiling pot coming from the North is seen by the prophet pouring its scalding contents in torrents upon the whole land. This vision is self-evident. It denotes the pouring forth of a hostile force from the North, whose invasion is to desolate all the land. In other words God tells the prophet that his message is to be of judgment and that that judgment will

[1] xv. 16.

come in no long time. "If it does not do so," says the Divine Voice, "believe Me no more, for I have not called you; but if in the next few years you see this prophecy beginning to be fulfilled, then be assured of your divine predestination."

This sign was at once fulfilled. Within a year a terrible horde of barbarians, the Scythians, poured down from the northern steppes of Asia, like the Goths and the Huns in later days, and ravaged all the East with fire and sword. Judah suffered among the rest; though Jerusalem's fate was left to Babylon's more persistent might in Jeremiah's later and evil days.

"The seeking for signs and wonders" is condemned by Christ as only the sign of a superstitious mind. But though we should not seek for signs, it is another thing *when they come to us unsought.*

You all remember the "sign" Spurgeon got when he went to visit a great preacher, who had come down to Cambridge from London. He went by appointment to arrange with him whether he should go to college before entering the ministry. He was shown into an empty room by the servant maid and left there for two hours. At length in fear he rang the bell, to ask if the great man was never going to come and speak to him. He was told that he was off to London an hour

before. The maid had never told the distinguished guest that Spurgeon was in. He had waited in another room for an hour and then left to catch his train.

Spurgeon believed God's hand was behind the servant maid, and never made another attempt to go to college. You may call him superstitious, but perhaps it was all for the best. A genius like his might have withered in the close air of a college. You don't improve the cedars of Lebanon by putting them under glass.

On the whole, however, we should be chary of looking for signs in extraordinary events. The true sign manual of God is to be found where the youthful prophet was to find it, in *circumstance*. He was confirmed in the genuineness of his vision by the way in which it was fulfilled afterwards. So if things open out before you in a certain path, if God shuts one door as you are proposing to enter another, be sure that God is leading you on. Feel like Eliezer at the well: "I, being in the way of obedience, the Lord led me."

To close, let us look at *the ultimate success of God's education of Jeremiah*. "I have made thee this day a defenced city, and an iron pillar, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, against the princes thereof, against the priests thereof, and against the people of the land.

They shall fight against thee; but they shall not prevail against thee, saith the Lord."[1]

What an array against this poor weak sensitive child! And yet he did not fail. As we have seen, persecutions, imprisonment and isolation were his lot; but the spirit remained unbroken, and after his death his worth was recognized, and when men sing, "The goodly fellowship of the prophets praise Thee," they shall never cease to think of him.

And the lesson of it all is obvious. *When God touches any man He makes him strong, even in that which is weakest.* In his *Bible of Amiens* Ruskin gives us a fine illustration of that. Over the western gate of its noble cathedral there is a splendid statue of Christ and on either side the twelve Apostles. Below each, there is a medallion representing their greatest virtue and beneath its opposing vice. In the case of Peter, the conspicuous quality is his courage, and you see a man riding on a leopard. Beneath is the same man running away from a similar wild beast. The lesson of it all is this—that by contact with Christ, our very weakness may become our strength. Before coming to Christ Peter fled from the leopard: now he rides upon it.

So was it with Jeremiah. The touch of God

[1] i. 18, 19.

turned his cowardice into courage, and so may it be with you and me. Let God touch us by the hand of Christ. Let His Cross lay its spell upon our spirit and all that is weak and unworthy shall pass away. We shall be able to say with Paul, "I will glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me; for when I am weak, then am I strong."

# X

## (2) Jeremiah's message to Jerusalem: the length and limit of opportunity

I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels.—Jeremiah xviii. 3.

Then shalt thou break the bottle in the sight of the men that go with thee.—Jeremiah xix. 10.

WE have seen that it was Jeremiah's terrible commission to be a preacher of Doom. That was to be the end of his ministry. "The rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it." So, in unison with the Preacher on the Mount, does the preacher of the valley end his sermon. Yet it would be wrong to say his message was all gloom. He had a gleam of hope even in the end, and he had a message of opportunity at the beginning. This latter is the thought which we see in this striking parable of "*the Potter's Vessel*," which we may take as one of the most typical of Jeremiah's sermons.

The sermon is composed of two chapters which

are, however, one in meaning: one in the figure they employ and one in the lesson they convey. That figure is all the more striking in that it is *acted* as well as *spoken*.

Christ's parables are all spoken ones. "The Prodigal Son" is so vivid in itself that it needs no outward gesture "to point the moral or adorn the tale." But Jeremiah's words cannot compete with his great Successor. He feels that in dealing with "this stiff-necked and rebellious house," he will need to act his sermon as well as preach it. In the first of these chapters, therefore, he summons the Elders of Jerusalem to meet him in *the Potter's House*, or, as we would say to-day, at the Potteries. It must have seemed to them a strange intimation. Much as if I were to intimate that by the permission of one of the shipyards in this city I was going to preach my sermon next Sunday morning in a shipyard on the riverside, instead of in this church, giving illustrations of the building of character from the construction of a ship. It might not be a bad idea. I might get some to listen to me that would never be seen in this church.

At all events, that is something like what the prophet did. He went down to the potter's workshop, accompanied by the rulers of the city. Arrived there he shows them the potter engaged

at his work on the wheel. As Jeremiah stands before him he points out his several actions as he fashions his often beautiful work. First, he takes a piece of moist clay in his hands; then he applies it to the wheel which, whirling round, moulds the vessel before their eyes. The potter takes it up and examines it critically. To an ordinary observer it may look well enough; but the potter is not satisfied. Its curve is not perfect. It bulges out on one side. So he crushes the clay all up again, puts it on the wheel once more, and this time it emerges without flaw. He is satisfied now, places it in the furnace and, after the requisite time, takes it out *a now finished work.*

Such is the first part of the prophet's sermon. Now for the second. First of all Jeremiah takes up one of the vessels that have been *already fired but rejected by the potter*, because it is either cracked in the making or has some flaw in its shape or colour. To his astonished congregation he intimates that this second division of his discourse is to be delivered in the "*valley of the Son of Hinnom.*" This valley was a deep ravine outside the walls. It was one of those waste places often seen at the outskirts of a great city, where the refuse is cast away. In fact, it was a kind of free coup for Jerusalem, an unsavoury place, where what was dead or filthy or broken was cast away.

Thither with this rejected vessel the prophet makes his way, and lifting the earthen pot high in the air solemnly dashes it to pieces on the ground.

Did these Jerusalem elders think by this time that their prophet was going off his head, that "much thinking was making him mad"? I doubt it. They were clever enough to follow their bold preacher's purpose; but if they were in any doubt the message is soon made clear and plain in the third part of the prophet's discourse which, as we see from the closing verses of the nineteenth chapter, he concluded in the very "Court of the Temple."

"Do you remember," he begins, "that piece of moist clay, which was marred in the potter's hands? He did not throw it away because it did not come right at first. He put it on the wheel again, because it was still soft and pliant. But these fragments which now lie among the rubbish-heaps of the valley of Tophet—shall I ever make these into a thing of beauty? Impossible! They are good for nothing now. And why? Because they are not like that moist clay, which you can mould and remould till it is shaped to a perfect model. No, they are hard, intractable fragments. Once broken, the vessel of which they were the parts is gone for ever. It is a vessel that cannot be made whole again.

"And the lesson it conveys is obvious. You are like that soft clay in the potter's hands. 'You are the clay and He is the Potter. You are all the work of His hands.' And like that potter He wants to shape you into something beautiful, 'a vessel meet for the Master's use and prepared unto every good work.' But as it was with the clay, so is it with you. By your disobedience you have hitherto defeated His purpose. As He looks at you He sees no longer the fair ideal, which He had in His mind at the first. Yet still there is time, time to repent. The clay is still moist. The opportunity is not past. Even now, shapeless in ethical purpose and religious consistency as you are, He can still remould you to something like the fair ideal you have up till now so egregiously failed to realize.

"But, if still you refuse, if still you harden your hearts to my appeal, there must come a time, and it is not distant, when stiffened by repeated rejection, you shall no longer be open to God's shaping hand. And what will you then become? You will become like these broken fragments which now lie yonder in that desolate valley. Broken by your foes, cast off by your God, your opportunity will be for ever gone, your day of repentance past."

Such was the solemn sermon Jeremiah preached

that day in the valley of Tophet. It was a strange text he took. It was a strange place to preach. No cathedral with stained glass canopied the worshippers. No choir or rolling organ accompanied the preacher. And yet I venture to think that few more impressive sermons were ever delivered to man than that which these Elders and Priests listened to that day among the middenheaps of old Jerusalem.

And now what lesson has it for us? *It has of course a special message for the nations of this and every age.* It was originally meant for the nation. It was spoken by Jeremiah probably at the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim after the lamented death of Josiah. The bright but transitory reformation of that monarch had passed away, and after his death the people seem to have reverted pretty much to their old sinful ways. Idolatry and heartless luxury still rioted in high places. Faith in Jehovah was at a low ebb. The people were sinking into that "atheism of fear" which we see in Isaiah's time and Ezekiel's. They were saying, "There is no hope; but we will walk after our own devices." Jeremiah tries once again to awaken them to the solemnity and the opportunity of their condition. *He appeals to them to lay hold of God's offer ere it is too late.* Else the day must quickly come when they too shall, like that

broken vessel, be cast into the "midden heaps of history."

And what was true of old Jerusalem is true still. Nations have their opportunities, and if they fail to realize them they too shall pass away. Only by self-effort and thrift and diligence in work can any nation hope to maintain its commercial position among the nations of the world. If its people sink down into a godless luxury and frivolity and immorality, there can be but one end to such courses. History has again and again proved that it is so. It will pass away "because it knew not the time of its visitation."

But I wish rather to apply the lesson of our text to *the Individual life*. Jeremiah is a great individualist as well as a statesman, and his great thought here—that of "*the length and limit of opportunity*"—has as pregnant a bearing on the personal as on the public life of the people.

(1) And, first of all, Jeremiah would teach us here that *God has an ideal for every human life*.

Notice the words, "the *potter wrought a work upon the wheels*." He was not spinning there at random. He did not put the clay on the wheel without a plan. All the time he had a definite purpose in his mind and was seeking to carry it out.

So, we learn from that the inspiring truth that,

as Bushnell says, "Every man's life is a plan of God." When a little child comes into the world, an unshapen mass of possibilities, God has a grand purpose before it, "We are the clay and He is the Potter." And as the wheels of time are spinning resistlessly round, He is behind them, trying—often, alas! so unsuccessfully—to shape them into something beautiful and noble.

How inspiring this thought should be to us all, specially the young! We sometimes hear of men who have been enabled to sustain pain and disappointment and sickness by the thought they were destined for a great work. When John Knox lay ill, and seemingly dying, in a French warship off St. Andrews Bay, that was about to carry him away a captive to France, it is said he caught sight of the tower of the Church of St. Andrews, where he had first preached the Gospel. The dying man revived, rose up in his bed and, pointing across the sea, said, "There is the place God first opened my lips to speak for His glory, and sure am I of this, that I shall not die until He brings me back to complete the work which I there began."

Knox was sustained by the thought that God had a great work for him to do, and that he was "immortal till his task was done." But so should we all feel. The Divine Potter has a noble

destiny for us all. Let us be fellow-workers with Him, yielding ourselves to His hands, that He may mould us into vessels meet for His use.

Away, then, with the thought that you lack advantages! God knew all about your advantages and disadvantages when He took the pliant lump of your clay into His hands. He knew what He could make out of you and what He could not; but *be sure of this, that the purpose* God has for each one of us at the first is infinitely grand and noble. "It doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that when He shall appear we shall be *like Him*."

(2) But in the second place we learn here that *it is in the power of man to frustrate this divine ideal.*

The clay when it first came from the wheel was "marred in the hand of the potter." Of course we must not press a parable too far. The clay was not responsible for that. It was only a piece of dead matter and could not "mar" itself.

But it is clear the prophet means that *we are all responsible.* We are not dead clay. We are self-determining beings. We have the power to resist and even frustrate the divine ideal; so that when the vessel comes out it *is* marred. Alas! can we doubt this solemn truth? How many vessels around us are being marred in the potter's hands! By Indolence, Sensuality, Intemperance,

Indifference, how many "might have beens" are there in our own acquaintanceships! Men of the most splendid talents, but alas! hopelessly "marred" by sin.

Nay, don't we know it ourselves? Many of us are sadly aware that, but for our sins, *we would have been far better men than we now are.* We have not been failures; but we failed to realize youth's ideals. The vessel that has come out of the years has been sadly "marred in the potter's hands."

(3) But in the third place Jeremiah teaches us here that *though we may frustrate God's high purpose in our life-making at the first, there may yet be worked out of our life another purpose, not perhaps so good yet still sufficiently great and useful.*

For notice what the potter did when the first plan was marred. He did *not throw the clay away.* No, he crushed it up again and made it into a new vessel. The clay was still moist and so it was not lost, though the first plan was unfulfilled. By that the prophet would teach us the encouraging truth that though by our sins we may frustrate God's first purpose for us, His grace is not done with us. "My first plan is marred," says the great Potter, sadly it may be, *for the second is seldom equal to the first.* We cannot sin away our youth without suffering some loss. Nevertheless,

God has hopes for us yet. Again and again He takes the vessel marred by youthful folly and tries to shape it to something noble.

If, then, there are any of us here who feel that hitherto we have fallen far short of the divine ideal, that the pattern shown us "in the Mount" has been but poorly realized in our life, that we have spoiled what was meant to be so fair and beautiful and left only the shapeless mass of a wasted life, if it be so, is not Christ here speaking through the prophet and saying to us, "Yield yourselves afresh unto God! Submit to His shaping purpose, and even yet He will work out of your poor clay something that will be fit for service. If not a fair flagon for a royal table, at least a simple cup that can carry some cold water to a thirsty traveller"?

That is no empty vaunt. He who turned the drunken sailor of Southampton into Olney's sweet hymnist and London's great preacher; He who made of the Magdalene of Capernaum's streets the saint at the foot of the Cross; He can take any vessel, however marred, and shape it to a grand purpose. Only yield yourself to His Grace while still there is time.

(4) But in the last place we are taught here the solemn lesson that *though there is a divine length to life's opportunity there is also a limit to it.*

There came a time when the potter with all his

skill could do nothing for the lump of clay. That was when, baked in the furnace, the prophet took it to the Hinnom valley and dashed it to pieces there. Not all the potters in the world could do anything for it then. It was simply broken pottery, fit only to fill a hole with.

The years as they pass are not only shaping us. They are hardening us too. Year by year we become less pliant to influence, less malleable to circumstance, until at last the time comes when, baked in the furnace of life, we refuse to yield to any change at all. We pass out of the potter's hands. God Himself can do nothing with us then.

And if at that time it be found that the vessel is marred, shapeless, cracked, good for nothing, what shall God do with it then? What can He do, brethren, but throw it away as Jeremiah did in the valley of Tophet?

A sad message! And yet, alas! too often confirmed by the bitter facts of life. As you walk along the great streets of our cities on a Saturday or Sunday night, as you visit their gaols and poor-houses and prisons and "Models," what do you see written on many a sad face there? Is it not this, that Jeremiah put into action when he broke the bottle and cast its useless shards into the valley of Tophet? Whatever hope there may be in the

vast forever—and we would not seek to limit the mercy of our God—so far as this world is concerned, their opportunity is gone for ever. They are "a broken vessel," whose fragments are fit only to fill a hole with!

It need not, through God's grace, it shall not be so, for any to whom I now speak! Now is the day of opportunity! Now is the day of salvation! Let us yield ourselves alive unto God this day, as Saul did on the Damascus road, and He will make us as He did him, "chief of sinners" though he was, into "a chosen vessel," "meet for the Master's use and prepared unto every good work."

# XI

## (3) GOD'S INDESTRUCTIBLE WORD

He cut it with the penknife, and cast it into the fire.—JEREMIAH XXXVI. 23.

Take thee again another roll, and write in it all the former words.—JEREMIAH XXXVI. 28.

WHAT is a great preacher? Some would say, "A popular orator. A man like Spurgeon, who gathers the thousands by his voice." But this is not the Bible view of a great preacher. Some of the greatest preachers in the Bible were the most unpopular men of their time. One of these was Jeremiah. At the time when this chapter of his life transpired he was the most hated man in all Jerusalem, hated by king and princes and people alike; so that he describes himself here as "shut up," unable to go about, even to the house of the Lord, lest he should be stoned in the streets.

And yet he was the greatest preacher in all the land. His words endure, while all the ephemeral oratory of the court preachers of his time, "the

false prophets," the "idol pastors of the flock," as he fiercely describes them, have passed away. Of no man was it more true than of him, "The world passeth away, and the lust thereof; but he that doeth the will of God endureth for ever."

Of this truth, this dramatic encounter of the king and the prophet is a striking illustration. It divides itself into three scenes. There is first the quiet room in the city, where Jeremiah, "shut up" by man, is proving that "the Word of God is not bound," by dictating to his faithful friend Baruch a full record of his prophetic ministry. It is an account in which, as we saw in our last chapter, judgment and mercy intermingle; but towards its close it becomes more and more threatening in its tones. The enemy is near the gates! "The axe is laid at the root of the tree"! Nebuchadrezzar draws nigh!

Nevertheless doom may be averted still. Let the king and his councillors give up their foolish trust in Egypt, "that broken reed." Let them throw themselves on the mercy of Nebuchadrezzar. Best of all, let them trust in God alone and cast away their idols and their vices and there is hope even yet that a remnant may be saved.

Eager that this hope may not be quenched, even at the eleventh hour, Baruch hastens with his

"roll" to the temple courts, so that he may meet some of the chief men there, tell them of its ominous contents, and thus lead the king to listen to its message. He is successful in doing this. A royal council is arranged, and one of the "princes" friendly to Jeremiah agrees to bring the matter before the king.

This brings us to the second scene in our chapter. It is a splendid room in that "ceiled house" which, Jeremiah tells us, this poor puppet-king spent so much of his brief reign in building. His lords and councillors are round about him and the king sits before a fire, for it is winter time; not improbably flushed with wine, for drunkenness was one of his vices. A knock is heard at the door. It is Jeremiah's roll, and the king directs his secretary to read it out. As he does so the king turns his face to the reader, listening at first with half-concealed contempt. But as Jehudi goes on with his recital of the "thoughts that breathe" and "the words that burn," the monarch's face changes in its expression from indifference to annoyance, from annoyance to anger, from anger to fury, until at last, losing all self-control, he rises from his seat, tears the roll out of the secretary's hand, hacks at it with his penknife, as if it were some noxious beast, and then flings the tattered fragments into the fire, watching

it consume to ashes there. "He cut it with a penknife and cast it into the fire."

Once again the scene changes. We are back in Jeremiah's little room. Again the prophet speaks and again Baruch writes. It is the same words as before. Only this time "other like words" are added to it, and there is no suggestion to send it again to the king. God's word has been rejected, but it will not be abrogated. It remains indestructible. "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My words shall not pass away." Such are the three scenes brought before us. What are they fitted to teach us?

I. First of all this, that *God speaks to man.*

Not once or twice only. This was not the first time He spoke to Jekoiakim. If you read his brief biography you will see that God sent him message after message.

First of all He did so *by giving him a good example.* His father Josiah was one of the noblest kings that ever sat on the throne of David. All his childhood he had that example pointing him to a better life. Yet, in spite of that, he was one of the worst of kings. "He filled Jerusalem," we are told, "with innocent blood." He oppressed the people with heavy taxation in order to build himself "a lordly pleasure house," whose roofs were "ceiled with cedar" and whose walls were

"painted with vermilion." At a time when his nation was in its death-throes, he was spending his days in drunken revelry and oppressive luxury.

"The corruption of the best," says a Latin proverb, "is the worst." Botanists tell us that "the deadly nightshade," the most poisonous of British wild flowers, is the first cousin of the wholesome "potato." If the son of a Josiah becomes a bad man, he will likely grow up a Jehoiakim. In the old cemetery of Princeton University two graves stand side by side. One is the grave of Jonathan Edwards, the first President of the College and America's greatest saint; the other is the grave of Dr. Burr, his son-in-law, and a man also eminent for piety. You would have said that the child of such a parentage would have been a good man. Yet that child was Aaron Burr, who grew up to be an infidel and a profligate who, after a life of infamy, died a miserable death. Do not lightly esteem the blessings of a Christian home! Do not cut with a penknife that page out of the Family Bible which records a godly parentage. There is no message from God so potent as that which comes from a mother's lips. There is none which if despised is so fraught with disaster.

Once again God spoke to Jehoiakim by *Trouble*. He came to the throne in a time of

national mourning. His father had just fallen on the disastrous field of Megiddo, in battle with the King of Egypt. His younger brother, whom the people had placed on the throne in preference to him, probably because he was a drunkard and a profligate, had been carried away captive to Egypt to see his native land no more. Under such circumstances we might have expected Jehoiakim to have been sobered. As he sat on the throne we might have thought he would have turned over a new leaf. But this was not the case. He rioted out his days in luxury, immorality and oppression, and when Urijah a prophet lifted up his voice in protest, he hounded him to death, dragging him back from Egypt whither the poor man had fled and casting his dead body into a common grave. He would have done the same to Jeremiah; but the people rose in his defence. Bad as they were, they did not wish to have the blood of that great prophet on their conscience.

Jehoiakim's life illustrates the oft-illustrated fact, that if trials do not make us better they will make us worse. "The sorrow of the world worketh death." You have seen a boy playing with a little ship on the sea. His boat has drifted out into deep water. He cannot reach it, so he flings stone after stone, to fall beyond it, in the hope that these stones will by their splash cause

waves that will drive it in shore. Unfortunately, he does not fling his stones far enough, and the boat is only driven by them further out to sea. So God troubles the water of life to drive us nearer Himself. But these troubles, if disregarded, become like the misdirected stone. They only drive us further out into the ocean of reckless infidelity and open sin.

It was wonderful that, after such a life, God should have sent the king any further message at all. And yet He did so. This "roll" of Jeremiah is God's last message to him. It was chiefly a message of judgment; yet, as I have said, it was also a message of mercy, which if he had even then listened to would not have been too late to save him, as it did Manasseh. But he heard it not. "He cut it with a penknife and cast it into the fire."

II. That brings us to the second lesson of our chapter, *God's word may be despised.*

"He cut it with a penknife." Let us look at this knife with which the king mutilated the word of God. It is not unknown to-day. There are not a few who are thus cutting and carving the Divine message in order to make it suit their own convenience. They may not do it so contemptuously as Jehoiakim, but they do it as effectively. They cut out of it all that gives it anyvalue to

others. *They do not burn it, but they bowdlerize it;* and when they are done with it, it might almost as well be cast into the fire. There is, for example, the penknife of *Rationalism*. This is the method that is used by the Modernist to cut out of the Bible all that is supernatural. He leaves out of Christ's life all that is miraculous in it. He gives you the Sermon on the Mount and tells you Christ was a great prophet, but when you come to those passages which reveal Jesus as the Son of God, when you turn up such texts as John iii. 16, you find a great blank. He leaves with you an emasculated Gospel.

Again, there is the *penknife of Prejudice*. This is a penknife which does its work very secretly. You would not think from the outward appearance of such a Bible that there had been any change in it. To the eye it is all there still. But not to the heart. The objectionable passages have not been cut out but scraped out by its owner. Only those passages he likes are retained. The rest has been discarded as "out of date."

Such a passage, for example, as the Fourth Commandment is often cut out of the Bible to-day. "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy." The young man, in some quarters at least to-day, does not believe that. It is only a part of the Old Jewish Law. Christ has abrogated it. He said,

"The Sabbath was made for man." It does not matter how you behave, then, on the Sabbath, so long as it does you good. No matter whether your having a good time makes others work like slaves. No matter whether what was given by God originally to be a day of worship and rest, "true to the kindred points of heaven and home," is turned into a loud and brawling holiday with all the peace and quiet taken out of it, with the house of God forsaken and man's spiritual life neglected with the consequent degradation of all his moral values. No matter, I say, for these things. The Fourth Commandment is out of date. Let us cut it out of our Bible, and "cast it into the fire."

Again, another part of the Bible which is apt to be scraped out by the penknife of Prejudice are those sections which set forth *God's Wrath against sin*. This was probably the part that roused Jehoiakim's anger. He had listened with contemptuous indifference at first; but when Jeremiah went on to speak of Jerusalem being taken and its houses burned with fire and its people and king captured, he got angry. He rose and "cut it with a penknife, and cast it into the fire." So, I need not say, do men still deal with God's word. God is a God of love, they say. It will be all right in the end. All right? How can it be all right if your life is all wrong? Is it kinder to

plaster up your cancerous souls by crying, "Peace, peace, when there is no peace," than to tell you plainly in the words of the prophet, "There is no peace," saith my God, "to the wicked"?

III. And there are other penknives on which, did time permit, I might dwell; but I hasten to look at the last great lesson taught by our story, this namely, that *God's Word is indestructible.*

Though God's messenger may be rejected, God's message remains. The roll of Baruch may be hacked and burned, but God's Word cannot be destroyed. When Jeremiah hears the story he sits down in his room and indites just the same words to his secretary: only Baruch remarks, "There were also added many like words."

What were these added words? As we read elsewhere, they were terrible ones for the wicked king. "His dead body shall be cast out in the day to the heat, and in the night to the frost. He shall be buried with the burial of an ass, drawn forth and cast out of the city."

Four years after these words were spoken, they received a tragic fulfilment. The end of Jehoiakim is obscure. He may either have perished in a foray outside the walls against the Babylonian armies which were then investing the city, or he may have died by the assassin's hand in some insurrection within the walls against his

hated rule. At all events the words of Jeremiah were, we may be sure, fulfilled, else they would not have been recorded. His dead body was probably pitched over the walls or left outside them lying there to rot in the sun like the carcass of an ass. He went down to

> "The vile dust from whence he sprung,
> Unwept, unhonoured and unsung."

God's words may be rejected. God's Word cannot be destroyed. The burnt roll of the prophet remains with its mystic letters clear upon it, "Nec tamen consumebatur." The dead body of the contemptuous king lies out in the night, there to find a burial in the vulture's mouth and the jackal's teeth.

This was the last great attempt of Jeremiah to save the nation. Henceforth he realized that all that could be done was to save a remnant out of it. With this purpose he gave the last king of Jerusalem, Zedekiah, all the good advice in his power. Zedekiah does not seem to have resented his counsels as Jehoiakim did. He feared if not respected the great prophet, and sought to protect him from the fury of his enemies who were now greatly in the ascendant, owing largely to the deportation of all the best of the people to Babylon.

But kindly as Zedekiah was, he was a weak man. He broke his oath with the King of Babylon and the end was a second destruction of the city, far more terrible than the first. Jeremiah stands out in these days as a strong pro-Babylonian. This made him hated as anti-patriotic, much as we might speak of a man in the Great War as a pro-German. But the reverse was the case. Jeremiah was a patriot of patriots, and he gave a fine proof of his faith in the future of his country by buying a piece of land in his native Anathoth at a time when it was invested by the foe. What Jeremiah strove to teach to his people during these terrible days was practically the same policy as Isaiah's, that their "strength was to sit still." "Trust in God," he said, "and above all things make no hostile alliance against Babylon." Babylon is a "golden cup" in God's hand at present. She must not be interfered with. Her time for destruction will come; but it is not yet. Had Jeremiah been listened to, Jerusalem's doom might have been averted and the Seventy Years Captivity never taken place. But it was not to be. God had otherwise designed, and we can now see it was for the best.

As for Jeremiah, his closing days are, like Isaiah's, wrapped in obscurity. The Bible is not a book of deaths. It concentrates only on one

Death, and for the most part leaves the passing of its heroes unrecorded.

Our last sight of the prophet is in Egypt, whither he had been unwillingly carried by his enemies, after their last futile rebellion against Nebuchadrezzar. There the great prophet died; it may be by the hand of his foes or by the natural process of dissolution. Whichever it was, we may be sure it would be a death of unflinching courage. He had done the work God had given him to do. He had stood like "an iron pillar" for the truth as he believed it. God had fulfilled his words, and though his beloved land was now desolate and forsaken he did not die without hope for its future. Babylon would not go unpunished and God would yet raise out of Jerusalem's ruins a new and fairer city and nation founded on a new and better covenant: "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel. . . . I will put My law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be My people. . . . I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

# XII

## HABAKKUK: THE PROPHET OF SCEPTICISM

I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what He will say unto me, and what I shall answer when I am reproved.—HABAKKUK ii. 1.

WHAT does the prophet mean by his watch-tower here? Had he any natural eminence in his mind? Some cathedral spire or quiet hill-top from which he could "view the landscape o'er" and be exhilarated by the distant prospect? No doubt there is mental refreshment to be gained by a merely physical elevation. Carlyle, in *Sartor Resartus*, has a well-known passage, in which he describes his hero as living in an attic some six or seven stories above the city's roar and listening to the confused hum of the traffic below, thus gaining a calm of mind and elevation of thought impossible to the dweller beneath. And Keble tells us, in his *Christian Year*, how it was on the summit of a lonely peak that he heard with soul-stirring power the voice of the Eternal.

"Where is Thy favoured haunt, Eternal Voice,
The region of Thy choice;
Where undisturbed by sin and earth, the soul
Owns Thine entire control?

"'Tis on the mountain's summit dark and high
When storms are hurrying by,
'Tis 'mid the strong foundations of the earth,
Where torrents have their birth."

But we do not think it is to any physical elevation that Habakkuk is referring, when he says, "I will set me on the tower and will watch to see what God will say unto me." No; it is a spiritual, not a physical eminence he has in his mind. It is the same thought as the Psalmist expresses, when he says, "When my heart is overwhelmed, lead me to the rock that is higher than I." Whatever of truth or experience makes you feel elevated above this passing show, whatever lifts you above the temporal and makes you feel the reality of the eternal; that is a tower on which when a man stands he sees things new and great.

Such an altitude may be reached by many paths. Its most familiar one is *prayer*. "He went up into a mountain to pray," is said of Jesus, "and as He prayed the fashion of His countenance was altered and His raiment became white and glistering." Whoever prays as Jesus prayed goes up a mountain and things get transfigured there.

Or *the Sanctuary*, the fellowship of God's house, is sometimes to us a watch-tower, from which we can see things under a new perspective, "see life steadily and see it whole." It was so to another Psalmist, when he was perplexed with the mystery of life, "when I thought to know this, it was too painful for me, until I went into the sanctuary of God. Then understood I."

Or, perhaps most common of all, it may be *some great experience of trouble*, when suddenly after long seeking a new truth flashes on the mind and all becomes plain. A Highland minister tells how, after the death of his wife in her first childbirth, he fell into such a state of rebellion against fate, that one day he flung himself down on the floor, praying God to put an end to his life. But as he lay there, a text floated into his mind, he knew not how. "I am the Door," it said; "by Me, if any man enter in, he shall be saved." It seemed to have no connection with his present condition. Nevertheless it was the door to him. Entering in by that narrow way, he seemed to climb a long stair till he came out on a wide prospect. From that watch-tower, he viewed life as a small segment of time. He saw behind it the great mountains of eternity and there on the highest of these the heavenly city, to which his beloved had gone and whither he would one day follow her. He

came down from that watch-tower so calm, so changed from what he was before, that his friends were amazed and asked the meaning of his new composure. He could not, however, tell them then, but only replied, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away, Blessed be the name of the Lord."

It was probably to such a "dark tower" that the prophet came at this time. He lived in one of the saddest hours of Israel's history. Jerusalem had been taken a second time by the King of Babylon and wholly destroyed. His soul had been deeply stirred by the cruelty of these Chaldean enemies. There had been a time indeed, when he had really wished them to come, in order that they might punish Jerusalem for its sins. But when his wishes were realized, the event far exceeded his expectations or desires. "That bitter and hasty nation" had not been content with punishing the wicked, they had destroyed the good as well. They had "devoured the man that was more righteous than he."

Their iniquity and violence had not only drawn from the prophet a cry of anguish, but had imperilled his very faith in God. Not that he denies His existence; no Scripture writer does that. It is only "the fool" who says, "There is no God."

But he doubts God's righteousness. "Thou art of purer eyes than to behold iniquity," he cries, "wherefore" then "lookest Thou" with unconcern "upon them that deal treacherously?" It all seems a mystery to him. "O Lord," he asks, "how long shall I call, and Thou wilt not hear? Why dost Thou show me iniquity, and cause me to behold grievance?"

But there is no immediate answer to his prayer, and he is tempted to say with a great modern thinker in his hour of bitter sorrow, "Yes, there is a God; but He does nothing. He does nothing." (Carlyle.)

Until he got up to his watch-tower! Yes, and set himself there; waiting till God would speak to him and waiting till he knew what answer he could make "when he was reproved," as he knew he would be, for having entertained such unworthy thoughts about Him. As he did so, all became clear. From that height of spiritual elevation, he saw that in the long run all would be well. Immediate deliverance was not indeed to be hoped for. "The vision is for an appointed time"; and to human expectation that time will seem long. But in the end "it will come and not tarry"; and when it does come it will be so clear that he who runs may read. For this is what the vision means: "Babylon shall be destroyed. Jerusalem shall be

restored and the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea."

That was what Habakkuk realized when he got up to his watch-tower. Beyond the chaos and bloodshed at his feet, he saw the distant but sure approach of the Kingdom of God. "God is coming!" he cried to his disheartened countrymen. "I see Him: He is hastening on. Do not be afraid. Do not doubt Him. I was tempted to do so once; but now I see how wrong it was. Trust and be not afraid, for"—and this is his great practical message to his generation—"the just shall live by his faith," or, as he means, by his fidelity he shall gain steadfastness.

His Faith—it is the same word as is used of Moses, when Aaron and Hur held up his arms in prayer in the battle against Amalek, so that "his hands remained steadfast, till the going down of the sun." So must it be with Israel now. They must abide steadfast in their faith, then they will be kept alive as a nation and as individuals through every trial. "The just shall live by his faith."

It is a great word. You all know how the Apostle Paul took it and made it the foundation stone of his doctrine of justification by faith alone, and how Luther carried it on into his great con-

troversy with Rome for a Gospel of Free Grace. To what mighty lengths may a living word of God reach out! Habakkuk had of course no idea of such an application, when he uttered this word to his disheartened people. He was not thinking theologically at all. He was only telling them to hold on to their faith in a righteous God and they would find in the end that God was "worth the trusting."

And yet, though so different in their outward application, these two meanings of our text are essentially the same. For they both come to this, that in times of trial and temptation, whether these trials are due to outward enemies, like the Chaldean armies, or to inward battles with "the rulers of darkness" within the soul, there is only one hope that is sure and steadfast, "The just shall live by his faith" *in God alone*.

That was what the prophet realized as he stood on his watch-tower, and as he did so we can understand his breaking forth into that magnificent ode which closes his book, of which the last verses put the creed of his life into imperishable song: "Although the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olives shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls, yet

will I rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation." [1]

We may ask, what are the lessons which the man on the watch-tower has to teach us to-day?

I. Well, I have already spoken of the value of his experience *as a means of spiritual uplift in the long, level and often monotonous path of life.*

It was not till the prophet got up to his watch-tower that he saw the meaning of life. If we wish to keep our life on high levels, if we wish to resist the temptation to degenerate on the one hand into mere money-making machines or on the other to become empty butterflies, we should seek to have periodic times of spiritual elevation, "moments on the mount" with God. Such moments are provided most simply of all, in proper use of the Lord's Day. In the Roman Wall on the North of England there is placed at every mile a tower rising above it. The sentinel on these towers was able to see the enemy at his first distant approach and call for reinforcements to defend the wall at the point of attack. And so along the battlements of life we have this watch-tower to which we may climb on every Seventh

[1] The authenticity of the last chapter has been questioned; but as Professor J. E. MacFadyen says, "Whether it be from his pen or not, it accurately and exactly expresses his spirit."

Day and see life from a higher altitude and gain a fresh vision of its perils and protections.

II. Once again Habakkuk teaches us the value of the watch-tower experience in *those times when our faith is severely tested by the onset of some unexpected or devastating trial.* At such a time, Habakkuk would say, there is only one place that can restore your faith. It is the watch-tower. Get up into the heights with God. See things in the light of eternity and the darkness will, if not pass away, at least disclose itself to be only a temporary gloom.

The Bible does not quarrel with scepticism, provided it is accompanied with a pure mind and an earnest spirit. On the contrary it gives a place to such a scepticism, in some of its greatest books. Job was a sceptic. Ecclesiastes was a sceptic. Habakkuk was a sceptic. But they did not remain in their scepticism. They did not let it soil their consciences. They fought their doubts. They climbed God's watch-tower and at last they saw the vision that made, if not all things clear, at least enough to make the next step clear.

As Tennyson puts it in his well-known lines:

"Perplext in faith but pure in deeds,
At last he beat his music out.
There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds.

"He fought his doubts and gathered strength.
He would not make his judgment blind.
He faced the spectres of the mind,
And laid them. Thus he came at length

"To find a stronger faith his own;
And Power was with him in the night
Which makes the darkness and the light
And dwells not in the light alone."

III. Last of all, Habakkuk's great text, "The just shall live by faith," reminds us that *the greatest of all watch-towers is Mount Calvary.*

It is when we climb that hill, that many things which before were dark to us become clear. One thing, for example, which we see from that eminence, is that sin is a great reality. It was sin that made Jesus die. Another thing we see there is that God's love is a great reality. It was love made Jesus die there too, and He died to put away our sins. When we see these two things from that watch-tower we shall be ready to see the third. It is this old message which Habakkuk learned, but with a meaning new and richer far, "The Just shall live by faith," faith in that love of God which offers forgiveness and new life to all that trust in Him alone for salvation.

When we stand on that watch-tower and hear that message from God, we shall know what

answer to make when our conscience reproves us. Will it not be this:

> "Nothing in my hands I bring;
> Simply to Thy cross I cling"?

And when we say that, what answer will He give? Will it, must it not be this: "The just shall live by his faith."

# XIII

## OBADIAH: THE PROPHET AGAINST NEUTRALITY

In the day that thou stoodest on the other side . . . even *thou* wast as one of them.—OBADIAH *v.* 11.

OBADIAH blames Edom for her heartless neutrality in the hour of Jerusalem's bitter need. She had not indeed joined with Zion's foes in their work of spoliation. She had not launched the dart or shot the javelin. Perhaps she was too cowardly to do this. But, on the other hand, she had done nothing to help. She had simply stood on the other side with a complacent neutrality when the houses were burning, the women and children wailing, and the men either lying dead on the deserted streets or marching away in chains to a distant and in most cases to an eternal captivity.

For this, says the prophet, she shall be punished, aye and punished as severely as if she had taken an active part amongst God's foes. "In the day that thou stoodest on the other side, in

the day that the strangers carried away captive his forces, and foreigners entered into his gates, and cast lots upon Jerusalem, even *thou* wast as one of them."

The historic event to which these words refer cannot be exactly determined; but it seems most probable that it was the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadrezzar, when the city was given over to fire and sword. On that occasion the Edomites played a heartless part to their old neighbours and kinsmen. Forgetful of the fact that their ancestor, Esau, was a brother of Jacob, they had stood by with careless indifference and even unconcealed delight as the city went up in flames, and the children were dashed to death on the streets. In one of the grandest Psalms of the exiles, there is a reference to their conduct, which shows how deeply their cruel neutrality had wounded their "brother Jacob." "Remember, O Lord, the children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem; who said, Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation thereof."

"For this," says Obadiah, "thou shalt not be 'unrewarded.'" "Though thou dwellest in the clefts of the rock, though thou exalt thyself as the eagle, and though thou set thyself among the stars, thence will I bring thee down, saith the Lord."—"As thou hast done, it shall be done to

thee: thy reward shall return upon thine own head."

The message therefore which Obadiah has to bring us is the sin of a base neutrality. The danger against which he warns us is that of "standing on the other side" in moments of grave moral issue.

Of course there are times when neutrality is not wrong. We are not always bound to espouse the quarrels of our neighbours. It may even be our duty at times to maintain an attitude of cool detachment to them. The way some people have of seeking to fasten their quarrels on their neighbours, is most unfair, and to ministers often very embarrassing. We should be content to admit that though we cannot see eye to eye with a man, our friend may. Let us not judge him as disloyal for that; but grant that in such a case he is quite entitled to "stand on the other side."

But there are other times when it is simply impossible to be neutral, if we are to play the man at all; times when there are two sides and two only; when not to be on the right side is to be on the wrong side; and if on such occasions we take up an attitude of cowardly neutrality, God will judge us as amongst His foes at the last. "In the day that thou stoodest on the other side . . . even thou wast as one of them."

Let us look at some of these times and the principle of our text will grow clear.

I. First and foremost I would say: *When it is a case of conscience, when it is a matter of moral principle we cannot with impunity stand on the other side.*

Many of you will remember how in the Great War, this was the issue that determined the action of Britain on the question, "Shall we take part in this conflict or shall we not?" When the question of a war between France and Germany became imminent, the proposal was made to Belgium by the German Chancellor that she should allow the German forces a free passage to the French frontier, on condition that payment would be made for all the expense of transport along her roads and railways. Belgium would not be asked to take part in the struggle. All that was asked was a free passage. But the Belgian Government felt, and rightly felt, that such a proposal could not be entertained. In the first place it was opening up an unprotected path right into the heart of France. Such an agreement could not but be regarded by that power as unfriendly in the last degree. And further it was bound to lead her country into danger and loss. France, in defending herself, could not get at her enemy, without damaging the country through which it was passing. Therefore,

in the interests of her people as well as from the wider point of view of equity, Belgium replied with a polite but very decisive negative. Then we all know what followed. Germany forced her way in through the forbidden path and carried fire and sword into the unfortunate land in doing so. Cities went up in flames. Libraries and churches were burnt to the ground. Hideous massacres took place.

And now came the question, "What was Britain to do in view of such a contingency? Should she stand on the other side and be neutral on such a question?" There were some who said she should. War was a thing so un-Christian that no nation should engage in it for any cause. But the great heart of the nation rose up in opposition to such an attitude. For independently of the question of the general unfairness of the treatment Belgium was receiving, there was the further consideration that in a treaty made long before we had pledged ourselves to defend Belgium from unprovoked aggression. We could not therefore be neutral in a matter like that. Our honour was pledged. Our name was inscribed on the treaty. We were bound to honour it.

You all remember the famous "scrap of paper" incident, how the German Chancellor contemptuously said, "You are not going to war for a scrap

of paper!" "But," said the British Ambassador, "it is a scrap of paper *on which our name is written*." That ended it, and ended it with eternal honour to the British name. Had our nation been untrue to her word then, had she "stood on the other side" when men were dying and cities were burning, she would have passed into history with an indelible blot on her escutcheon.

What is true of nations is no less true of individuals. The way of conscience is a narrow way, narrow as Balaam's Pass. There are only two sides to it: the inside and the outside. There is no golden mean in a question of right and wrong. Yet there are multitudes who act as if there were. They don't do the wrong thing themselves; but they allow others to do it for them while they share in the spoils.

Charles Dickens tells in one of his novels of a firm which was noted all over the city for its meanness and hardness. When you went to that firm for a favour, nothing could be more gracious than your reception. Only one partner was ever seen; but he was the most genial of men. He would do anything for you. But when you asked for something, his face at once fell. *He* would have been so pleased, were it not for his partner; but he, to be quite candid, would never let him agree to such a thing. The impression he gave

you, until you knew him better, was that he was one of the best of fellows; but the other partner —what a mean wretch he was! Is it not a true picture of the conscience of many of us? We do not care to do the dirty work ourselves, but we pay others to do it for us. We don't break open the safe; but we dispose of the stolen goods. What will God say of such moral resetters? Will He not judge us as not only as bad as those who have done the deed, but infinitely worse? Yes, surely. "In the day thou stoodest on the other side, thou wast as one of them."

II. Once more the cry of human need is one of those things to which we cannot with impunity take up a question of selfish neutrality.

It is one of the laws of the sea that whenever the S.O.S. is received on the wireless it is the duty of the ship that receives it to bend upon her track and make straight and with all speed to the cry of need. To be deaf to such a message would not only be to convict its captain of heartlessness, but to subject him to the most rigorous penalties. The question "Am I my brother's keeper?" can never be asked at sea.

And yet how many ask it on the land! We cannot read this text without being irresistibly reminded of the great application Jesus made of it in His story of "the Good Samaritan." These

two men, as they went down to Jericho from Jerusalem, were not irreligious men. They were not bad men in the moral sense of the word. No, but they were selfish men. As they saw this poor fellow lying motionless on the roadside, with the dark pool of blood issuing from his shattered head, the reaction which the sight made upon them was first and foremost one of self;—fear for themselves. Of course they were sorry for him. Of course they boiled with moral indignation against his injurers. Such men should be hung up on the highest trees. But what could *they* do? The poor man was evidently dead. The night was coming on. Other robbers might be lurking near. No, they must get on; on as quickly as may be to the nearest caravanserai; and so, with the best intentions in the world, "they passed by on the other side."

An old story! But has it no meaning for you and me? Have we not too often been guilty of a moral obliquity to the bitter need of the victims of the society in which we live? Do we not too often imitate the action of the rich man who drew down his carriage blinds when he was driving past the hovels on his estate. How many of us are standing on the other side to the great social wrongs that are eating like a cancer at the heart of our national life to-day; to the Temperance Ques-

tion, to the Gambling Question, to the Housing Question, to the Unemployment Question, to the hideous traffic in women! These are enemies of society as cruel and relentless as the Babylonian armies ever were to old Jerusalem. And yet we shut our eyes to them. We stand on the other side of their victims. We pass, many of us, through life without ever striking a single blow for them. Have you ever espoused an unpopular cause in your life? Have you ever put yourselves to trouble and expense in order that you might lift some poor fellow up who is lying half dead on life's highway? Or have you only stood, stood on the other side and said, "Poor fellow! But what can I do?"?

How will God judge such neutrality at the last? Will He not judge it, as Christ judged it, when He said: "Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to Me. . . . Depart from Me, ye that work iniquity."

III. And this brings me to say, last and greatest of all, that *the question of Christ, your attitude to Him*, is one of those questions on which it is impossible to take up a position of neutral indifference.

There are some questions in life, the answer to which is one of mere intellectual interest. It is not of profound importance what attitude you

take up in regard to them. Philosophers have disputed as to whether Plato or Aristotle were the greater philosopher. Literary men have argued as to whether Dickens or Thackeray were the greater novelist. Historians have disputed as to whether Gladstone or Disraeli were the most commanding figures in Victorian politics. But interesting as these questions are, they are not of life-and-death importance. You may take one side or another side, or no side at all, and not be a penny the worse. But there are other questions which are very different. The choice of a profession, the selection of your friends, the question of marriage—these are questions the answer to which is of no mere intellectual interest. They are big with issues which can hardly be overestimated. They are regulative of conduct and determinative of destiny.

Now, of such questions, the highest, beyond all doubt, is this: What think ye of Christ? Observe, I say, What think ye of *Christ*? Not of the doctrines about Christ, but of Christ Himself. There are questions *about* Christ on which a young man may be easily and I think justifiably undecided, and the Church has perhaps erred in exalting into essentials what she might well have left as neutral ground.

But the question *of* Christ is entirely different

from questions *about* Christ. For it is the question whether the highest in human life is to draw forth your spirit in true allegiance or whether you are going to turn away from that Perfect Ideal and choose a baser part. It is the question whether in the great conflict for God and Humanity you are going to ally yourself with the best or the worst.

In that conflict there is one issue and one only. You cannot stand by in selfish neutrality and say, "No, I am not prepared to take any side; at least not yet." You cannot do that. You must be either for or against Christ. You cannot stand on the other side in regard to the question, "What think ye of Christ?" There are no cross-benches in the House of the Lord of Hosts; and if in God's day you hang back in lazy indifference and say, "No, I am not prepared to take any side, as yet, then by that very indecision you are making the wrong decision. To be undecided for God is to be decided for the Devil; the most cowardly of all decisions:

> ". . . to God untrue,
> Yet wanting courage with His foes to side."

Many of you will remember the picture Dante gives of such weak souls in his "ante-hell of the neutrals"; men who lived "without praise

and without blame" because they had never boldly taken any side; moral cowards who in the great battle for God or against Him had fought only for themselves. For such men the poet has an intense and noble scorn. He makes Virgil say of them:

"Let us not speak of them, but look and pass on."

Heaven and Hell alike reject them, and the poet gives you the impression that it had been better if they were open sinners than the half-and-half characters they were. "So then, because thou art lukewarm and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth."

Another thing about such an attitude is that *it is more dangerous* than positive evil. The tragedies of life are more often those of indecision than those of wrong decision. There is no conscience more difficult to get at than the conscience of the man who stands on the other side. From such men every appeal you make falls like water off a duck's back, and when they come to die the truest epitaph you could write over their graves would be this:

Here lies
One who always stood
On the other side.
He was born a man,
Grew up a jelly-fish,
And died;—nothing at all!

"Choose ye this day whom ye will serve." "How long totter ye between two opinions?" "If the Lord be God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow Him." Thus your life, if not right, will at least have the courage of its convictions, It will not be afraid to show its colours and when it comes to God's judgment it will not meet with that most contemptuous of all condemnations: "In the day that thou stoodest on the other side . . . even thou wast as one of them."

How shall we be delivered from such a spirit of indecision? The prophet indicates the way in the latter part of his prophecy. Obadiah's great message is his denunciation of Edom; but he does not close without a cheering word to his own people in their dark day. He prophesies for them a happy restoration from the far lands of their captivity and a re-building of the House of the Lord in Jerusalem. "On Mount Zion there shall be deliverance . . . and the house of Jacob shall possess their possessions."

The last phrase is a peculiar one, and the translation has been rejected as tautological; for how can a man possess what he has already in possession? But may it not be that the prophet is teaching by that very phrase a deep truth of the spiritual life, that *a man may be in nominal possession of a thing which he does not really possess at*

*all?* Just as a man may have a beautiful library and yet never read one of its books; just as he may have untold wealth and yet live the starved life of a miser; so a man may have a spiritual heritage in name and yet know nothing of its power, because he has no faith to "take the things that are freely given him of God."

We have all a great heritage in Christ. "All things are yours"; but how few of us go forward to make that really our own! What we need is Courage and Consecration to enter on the promised land of our possessions in Christ and make them truly ours. It was said of Pastor Hsi, a great Chinese Christian, than no sooner was he converted than he determined "to possess his possessions." He sold all his opium fields from which he had been wont to make a great revenue, and turned the money into Christian Medical Dispensaries, by means of which he sought to cure those poor wretches who had become victims to the opium fiend. By a combined treatment of prayer and medicine, he worked marvellous cures, and by doing so entered on a life of peace and joy to himself that grew in usefulness to others, till in the end he died a saviour of his people.

None of us knows what possessions he may have, but the path to their enjoyment lies often through sacrifice and surrender. Let us not

flinch at such a call! It is a way that leads to true and lasting joy and delivers us for ever from that miserable half-and-half Christianity which so many practise, and of which the prophet speaks so contemptuously here when he says: "In the day that thou stoodest on the other side . . . even *thou* wast as one of them."

# XIV

## EZEKIEL: THE PROPHET OF RECONSTRUCTION— (I) THE VALLEY OF DEATH AND THE VISION OF LIFE

Son of man, can these bones live? and I said, O Lord, Thou knowest.—EZEKIEL xxxvii. 3.

EZEKIEL is the great prophet of the Exile. He was carried captive to Babylon when he was a young man at Jerusalem's first captivity under the short reign of Jehoiachin. There after ten years he learned of the second and far more terrible destruction of the city under the weak Zedekiah. It was a terrible blow to him and his broken-hearted brother captives. So great was his grief that he refused to put on mourning for the sudden death of his beloved wife, which by a coincidence took place on the very day when, by a divine monition, he learned of the opening of the siege of the city.

His grief, however, did not drive him to despair as it led others. At this hour he stood forth as the saviour of his country by his patriotism, his faith in God and his indestructible hope in the

future of his people. In one of his prophecies he cries, "I sought for a man that should stand in the gap, but I found none." But he was wrong. He had found one and that one was himself. Some five years before this he had been already called to the ministry in that wonderful vision which you find in the first chapter of his prophecy. But at first his message had been almost entirely one of judgment. His purpose had been to "justify the ways of God to man," and show his brother exiles that Jerusalem's ruin had been entirely due to her own sins. But no sooner did the city fall than he completely changes his tone. His message is now one of comfort and hope. Gifted with a most vivid imagination he uses image after image to set forth his firm conviction that "God has not cast away His people" and that her latter end shall be "better than it was at the beginning."

Of these messages of consolation beyond question the grandest is this vision of the "valley of dry bones." Coleridge has described it as the sublimest prophecy in the Old Testament, and without going that length it is certainly one of the most sublime. It is at once the product of a noble faith and a powerful imagination and has been an inspiration to the "Ecclesia oppressa" all down her chequered history.

The vision may be divided into three parts, each like a great symphony of music with its own "motif."

I. *There is first the Valley of Death*—"The valley which was full of bones."

II. *There is second the Challenge to Faith.* "Can these bones live?"

And III. *There is the Secret of Life and Power.* "Come, O Breath . . . that they may live."

I. The prophet rapt by the Hand of God feels himself carried away from his home on the banks of the River Chebar, and set down in the midst of "a wide and open valley." Such a scene is usually one of life and beauty. It tells of "green pastures and still waters," with cattle browsing among its flowery meadows and sheep wandering on its green slopes. But how different this! No verdure is here. All is bare, wild and desolate. No sound of life breaks the terrible silence, and at his feet the prophet beholds with a shudder instead of green grass heaps and heaps of human bones. Far as the eye can reach they stretch, illimitable like the headstones of a war cemetery in France. "They were very many," he says, and "lo, they were very dry." It is no ordinary graveyard, this. It is the sepulchre of a nation and it looks like the sepulchre of a nation that

has long been dead, nothing but a heap of mouldering bones!

Why does the Lord bring the prophet into this valley of death? Is it merely to put into his lips a sad wail on the vanity of life, such as Hamlet gives utterance to in a similar scene, when, taking the skull of the Court Jester in his hand, he says, "Alas! poor Yorick. A fellow of infinite jest! All come to this!"

No, far other, as we shall see, is the divine purpose. God intends ere He is done to give him a message of hope. But He wishes him to see, in the first place, how dark and hopeless is the situation of the present. There can be no true remedy for any disease which does not begin by going to the root of the matter. You must have sympathy with a man's deepest distress if you would be a real comforter to him. No rose-water optimism is sufficient for a cancer like this. In the valley of dry bones the prophet places himself alongside his people. He sits where they sit. He enters into their most tragic desolations. He is one with them in all their pain.

And not with them only. In that vision of the valley of death he has painted a picture which has drawn many a kindred spirit to look at it. Is it not a picture that has come home to many of our own hearts; sometimes in a man's individual,

more often in his collective experience? Individually, a man may be led into the valley of dry bones by the hot winds of passion and sensuality. Faith may be driven out of his soul by a life of low materialism. His heart and mind may become a charnel-house of impure thoughts and lustful imaginations, as Christ says, "full of dead men's bones and of all uncleanness."

So Byron felt when, on the eve of his thirty-third birthday, he wrote:

"Here lies
Interred in the past, from which there is no resurrection,
For the Days, whatever there may be for the Dust,
The Thirty-third year
Of an ill-spent life,
Which after a disease of many months
Expired on . . . . .
Leaving its successor, inconsolable
For the loss which occasioned its existence."

And such, I need not say, has been the experience of many besides him who, out of a life of moral failure, have been constrained to say:

"Oh! for a man to arise in me
That the man I am may cease to be."

There are times in the life of most men when, like Jerusalem's captives, we are tempted to say, "Our bones are dried. Our hope is lost. We are cut off" from redemption.

Or, more collectively, our experience may have regard to our work for the Nation or the Church. The lack of any results from our labours, the apathy of public spirit in questions of grave moral issue, the total absence of conversions from a minister's preaching, the sparseness of his audiences, the lack of interest in his hearers, the signs of spiritual indifference all around, the godlessness of the city, the deadness of the country, the prevalence of gross and open crimes, the diffusion of hatred in social life, strikes and wars, murders and suicides—all this may at times make the patriot, the philanthropist, the Christian worker tempted to take up a despairing attitude to the future and say with another prophet, "Who hath believed our report, and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?"

A young minister once said of a church to which he had gone, "It was a veritable valley of dry bones." He had left it chilled to the heart. It is to be feared there are many such, both in country and city; old and mouldy in appearance, with a few aged worshippers in the pew and a dead preacher in the pulpit. All that differs in them from Ezekiel's vision is that the bones are not "very many." On the contrary, they are very few; but they are dry enough, and it is the prevalence of such churches

that accentuates the need for union. For you will notice the first thing God taught the prophet was that the bones must come together before there could be any thought of revival. Disconnected bones can never become living men. We must have numbers and unity, before we can have life and strength.

II. But let us now pass to the second "motif" in this Divine Symphony, *the Challenge of Faith.*

As the prophet gazes mournfully across this valley of death, a voice says to him, "Son of man, can these bones live?" Now the natural answer to this question would be an everlasting "No." But the prophet is too reverent to limit the power of Jehovah, and so he simply replies with an answer of wistful ignorance, "O Lord, Thou knowest." This faith, such as it is, is rewarded by the call for the exercise of a higher faith. "Prophesy unto these dry bones, and say, O ye dry bones, hear the Word of the Lord; Behold, I will cause breath to come into you, and ye shall live."

A strange sermon to preach to such a congregation! I remember at the outset of my ministry I used to go out with my sermon on a Saturday and preach it on a hillside not far from my church. There were a number of sheep there and they used sometimes to gather round me, with curious eyes, as if they were thinking, "What is this lunatic

doing, shouting out these unintelligible sounds to us?" I used sometimes to think, when depressed, that they were more attentive than some of those I preached to next day. But the most unresponsive congregation that ever slept under a sermon—what was it to the congregation of Ezekiel that day? Yet he obeyed the voice of the Lord. He preached to them and said, "O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord."

It is a lesson to the preacher or teacher or mission worker that, however unresponsive his audience may seem, yet if he only perseveres in his task he may gain a result greater than he dreams. John Wesley tells in his *Journal* how once in his journeys he visited a local preacher called William Row. William told him of his own conversion under the great Evangelist. "Twelve years ago I was going over the Downs and saw many people together and I asked, What is the matter? They told me it was a man going to preach. I said, To be sure, it is some mazed man; but when I saw *you* I said, This is no mazed man. You preached on God's raising the dry bones, and from that day I could never rest till God was pleased to breathe on me and raise my dead soul."

The last sentence is significant. It puts clearly the place of the divine and the human in the birth of a soul. Ezekiel was first commanded

to preach to the dry bones and a great result followed. The bones came together. The flesh crept up over them. They were ready for life, but as yet there was no life in them. It was still a congregation of corpses.

It is a lesson in the preparatory work we have often to do in organizing a great movement for God. We have to "break up the fallow ground," to use another figure, by preaching and teaching and other means of winning the interest of our hearers. Only when we do this are we entitled to expect the blessing. We must make "the valley full of ditches" and believe that God will fill them in His own good time, though as yet there may not be a rain-cloud in the sky. But having done our part, then it is time to ask God to do His. "Come, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."

III. And that brings us to the third and great thought of this vision, *the Secret of Life and Power.* Having shown the prophet the necessity and yet the limitations of human effort, he is bidden to pray; to pray for the access of the Divine Spirit. "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."

To the pious Hebrew the wind was just the breath of God, and this breath of God was that which in man became the breath of life. So this

prayer in modern language just means this: "Come, O Universal Spirit of the living God, come from every quarter, come by every avenue of sense or intellect, of imagination or conscience, come by every instrument Thou dost choose, but only come and breathe into this congregation of corpses, that they may live."

And no sooner was that prayer uttered than the miracle was effected. The valley of death became a vision of life. The sepulchre became an army.

Now the lesson of all this is so obvious that I do not need to press it home. It is that without the Spirit of God our work is of no use. The preacher cannot give life. It is only God who can do that, but if we prepare for it and ask for it, He will give it.

[1] On this Pentecost Sabbath we are afresh reminded of that great truth. "Tarry," said Jesus, "in Jerusalem until ye be endued with power from on high." We know what that tarrying meant. It was not an idle waiting, doing nothing. No, it was tarrying at the feet of God. It was the tarrying of earnest prayer. It was the tarrying of men who said, "I will not let Thee go, except Thou bless me." It was a prayer meeting ten days long.

And then came the mighty rushing wind of

[1] Preached Whit-Sunday 1929.

God that turned that feeble company into a band of living courageous men who went forth to conquer the world, "clear as the Sun, fair as the Moon, and terrible as an Army with banners."

Is not that what we all need to-day, need in our individual struggle with sin and need in our work for God and the Church? We need life and power. We have all the instruments we want. Our churches were never better equipped. We have beautiful buildings, beautiful music, cultured preaching, but we need more power, and where does this power come from? It only comes from God.

As the poet Browning puts it, speaking of the river Jordan which issues full-born from a dark cave in a valley in Mount Lebanon:

> "This wealth of waters might but seem to draw
> From yon dark cave; but see, the source is higher,
> Yon summit half a league in air: and higher,
> The cloud that hides it: higher still the heavens
> Whereby the cloud was moulded, and whereout
> The cloud descended. *Force is from the heights.*"

Yes, all power is from the heights. We are only endued with life and power when we are endued with power from on high. It is the Spirit that giveth life.

Let us seek for this gift. Let us not forget to work. The prophet was only entitled to pray

when he had prepared the way of the Lord by prophesying to the dry bones. But having done our best, having responded to the challenge of faith, let us realize our impotence without the power from on high. Let us fall on our knees and seek from Him that Breath of Life which He is so eager to bestow on the prepared and seeking heart, saying in the words of the Christian poet:

"Breathe on me, breath of God,
Fill me with life anew,
That I may love what Thou dost love
And do what Thou wouldst do."

# XV

## (2) EZEKIEL'S GOSPEL TO THE INDIVIDUAL

Ye shall no longer use this proverb, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. . . . The soul that sinneth, it shall die.—EZEKIEL xviii. 1–4.

THAT sour grapes will set a man's own teeth on edge, is a fact so common to human experience, that a man needs only to eat a sour grape in order to prove its truth. In other words, if a man lives a sour life, if he eats the fruit of sinful indulgence, if he gambles and drinks and worse, there can only be one end to it. The result may not come so soon as its bodily counterpart. Months and years may pass before its consequences emerge, but in the end they will be seen, sure and remorseless. Physical deterioration, a body riddled with disease, moral death, a soul withered and a mind enfeebled and even destroyed will be the result of such a spiritual diet.

But the people of Ezekiel's day went further than this. They argued that if a man ate sour grapes, not only his own but also his children's

teeth would share in the consequent decadence. They held that the moral consequences of sin persevered in his children and even in his children's children. They did so, not only as an explanation of their present sad condition but as an excuse for making any attempt to remedy it in the future. All hope that they should be saved from national extinction had been taken away. "Our hope is lost," they cried; "we are cut off for our parts." They took no blame to themselves for this. "It is our fathers," they said, "that have brought us to this. They sinned and we reap the bitter fruits of their sin. There is no use preaching to us. We are hopelessly bound by the fetters of the past." "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."

Now it was one of the great merits of Ezekiel's prophecy and one of its greatest contributions to history that, in such an hour, he rose up and asserted the moral freedom of the individual soul. He is the first great prophet to have a message to the individual. No doubt he is indebted partly for this to his great master Jeremiah. But the hint which he gave him was developed with much greater fullness and boldness by the prophet of the Exile. He was led to do so by the circumstances of his time. The nation for the time had gone.

Jerusalem and the Temple were in ruins. It was natural, therefore, that he should turn to the individual soul as the last hope of Israel's inheritance. And nowhere does he do so more nobly than in this great chapter, in which at a time when his people were sinking into moral apathy, due to a false doctrine of Heredity, he declared with invincible assurance, the moral freedom of every soul to live its own life and therefore the moral responsibility of every soul for that life, saying, "Ye shall no longer use this proverb, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. For thus saith the Lord, All souls are Mine; as the soul of the father, so the soul of the child is Mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die."

Now it is a striking fact, and it is a proof how fresh and modern the Bible is, that the very same difficulties which perplexed the mind in Ezekiel's times, are pressing on the minds of men to-day. In their day the captives of Babylon blamed their fathers for their own miserable plight and fell into moral despair because of it, saying, "We cannot rise above our past"; and this is exactly what not a few are doing in our own day. One of the doctrines which medical science has brought to the front is the importance of heredity as a factor in disease. Of course there is a solemn truth in

that. There are many things besides our faces and our fortunes that we inherit from our parents. We inherit to a large extent our dispositions. Cheerful or sombre, active or lethargic, according to the temperaments we have, we are largely in that the product of inheritance. Medical men tell us that insanity is undoubtedly hereditary. And most solemn perhaps of all, certain habits would appear to be transmissible. This has indeed been questioned, but it would seem to be fairly certain, that the "drink habit" tends to reproduce itself. A child cradled in alcohol has a bent that way. From all which it seems no arbitrary judgment of a heartless Creator, but one of the deepest laws of our being, inherent in our very nature, and capable of good as well as ill in its development; that "the sins of the fathers" may be "visited on the children to the third and fourth generations," while at the same time the same law "keeps mercy for thousands of generations of those that love and seek God's commandments."

But while there is thus a deep and solemn truth in this old proverb, as the captives of Babylon were using it and as many are using it to-day, it is both false and morally dangerous. For what did these captives make of it, as they sat in moral despair by the banks of the Chebar? They made

it an excuse for doing nothing. They fell back into cowardice, laziness and sensual indulgence, saying, "There is no hope. Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die."

Now that is just what many are doing to-day. You meet a man who is sinking down under the twin curse of drink and sensual lust, and you plead with that man to rise up and in God's name fight and conquer the vile thing that is spoiling his life; but what does he say? "I tell you," he says, "there is no use talking like that to me. You do not know my upbringing. This thing is in my nature. I drank it in with my mother's milk. 'We are men of ruined blood.'"

Such is the way many speak to-day, or if they do not speak it they think it. That I do not exaggerate you have proof in modern drama and fiction. The literature of to-day is full of this false doctrine of Heredity. Ibsen and Maeterlinck on the Continent, Bernard Shaw and Thomas Hardy and Hichens at home, and a host of lesser lights, are all obsessed by the idea that a man is irresistibly bound by his past and that, struggle as he will, he can as little free himself from it as Danaë from her tower of Destiny. The moral of a hundred books and plays to-day is this one of our text, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge."

It is against this cynical view of life that Ezekiel protests here. It is the grand feature of the Bible that it always asserts the dignity of man. It does not flatter him. It paints him with no rose-water optimism, but as a child of many sins. Nevertheless it always contends for his moral freedom. Man has fallen and come far short of what God intended him to be. Yet in spite of that man is free, free to choose the good and refuse the evil; no influence of a father's past can defraud him of that liberty, and therefore of his moral responsibility before God. "For thus saith the Lord, all souls are Mine; as the soul of the father, so the soul of the son is Mine. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father; but the soul that sinneth, it shall die."

There are two great principles laid down by Ezekiel here.

I. There is *the immediate relation of the soul to God.* "All souls are Mine." "Man is not constituted simply by what he inherits. . . . He is connected as truly with God as with his natural ancestry, and that connection prevents his relation to the past from becoming a mere bondage." [1]

> "Our life's star hath had elsewhere its setting
> And cometh from afar.

[1] Dr. James Denney in *Studies in Theology*, p. 90.

Not in entire forgetfulness
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God who is our home."

This relation to God, says Ezekiel, is as real as the child's relation to its parents, and therefore the child can never be the mere sum of its hereditary influences. A new factor has been introduced at its creation—the factor of God. It comes fresh from His hand, no doubt conditioned by the laws of our human nature, but not fixed in its future destiny by these laws. Every baby as it lies in its cradle is something new in the history of the world. It comes fresh from "the womb of the morning," with possibilities all its own.

Such is the beautiful conception of man Ezekiel gives when he speaks in the oracle of God and says, "All souls are Mine. As the soul of the father is Mine, so the soul of the child is Mine."

But is it true? It is easy to say, Our heredity does not fix our fate; but do the facts bear out our contention? Well, of course we cannot prove it mathematically. The Bible doctrine of man, like the Bible doctrine of God, is a matter of faith; but there is at least one great fact in our moral nature which to my mind at least does seem to bear it out.

That is *the fact of Conscience.* How wonderful

is the conscience of a little child! Here is a baby, born of the most degraded parents, cradled in an atmosphere of drunkenness and impurity, and yet, let that child be rescued by a Barnardo or a Quarrier, let it be reared in a home of love, and it will grow up with a conscience as sensitive as your own.

Is not this the evidence of a divine ancestry in man? Is not this the divine "image and superscription" imprinted on the freshly minted coin of human life? Is not this the truth that the greatest of modern philosophers meant to express when he said: "Two things fill me with wonder: the starry heavens without and the moral law within"? Does it not confirm the truth of Ezekiel's conception of human nature, "All souls are Mine; as the soul of the father is Mine, so the soul of the child is Mine"?

II. Such is the first thought Ezekiel sought to teach the men of his generation, *the immediate relation of every individual soul to God*, and the second naturally follows from it, *the moral freedom and therefore the moral responsibility of that soul to God*. "Ye shall no longer use this proverb, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. . . . The soul that sinneth, it (and it alone) shall die."

The prophet here asserts the truth of man's

freedom and therefore man's responsibility. The love of liberty is one of the most inalienable instincts of the human soul. To win it or retain it men have most willingly shed their blood. The modern evolutionist, however, like the ancient pessimist, would deny that any such freedom exists. "The sense of freedom," says Herbert Spencer, "is an inveterate illusion." We are all birds in a cage, and the most we can do is to change our perch.

But against this view of human nature the old prophet strenuously reacts. "Ye shall no longer," he says, "use this proverb, The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. Every man shall die for his own sin." No doubt, he would admit there is a tremendous tyranny in the past, especially as life goes on. No doubt he would freely acknowledge that our birthright of freedom may soon be bartered for a mess of pottage. Nevertheless at the beginning it is not so. "All souls are Mine," saith the Lord, and just as He has imprinted on that soul the knowledge of good and evil, so He has also given it a power to choose between that good and that evil. Not merely Conscience but Free Will testifies to the fact that "all souls are God's."

And, once again, do the facts of life not bear out

the truth of Ezekiel's contention? Once again take this child in the fresh unfettered dawn of innocence. Give it the chance to choose the good which its conscience tells it it ought to choose, and who shall deny that, from the most unlikely roots, the most noble flowers shall spring. Take such lives as Dickens has described in "Oliver Twist" and "Little Nell," and shall we say they are mere fanciful creations, with no relation to the facts? Every slum-worker will tell you the contrary. Stars are found shining in the dust-heaps of many a slum alley, and some of the noblest men and women have come from them. It is possible to be a Christian anywhere, and this possibility, attested by thousands in every age, is a proof that the soul is not a sum of hereditary influences and that it comes into the world with an inalienable gift of freedom and therefore of moral responsibility.

No doubt the hereditary drag is there. No doubt there is a battle to be fought, but the Divine Power is there also. I do not deny the influence of heredity: I only deny its omnipotence. As Dr. Dale once said: "Heredity can fix a man's trial: it cannot fix his fate." That lies in his own hands, and that he may be able to conquer "his birth's invidious bar" God has given him the offer of His grace in Jesus Christ, by which we shall be

"more than conquerors" over all hereditary weaknesses.

"More than conquerors"—yes, for if we have a heavy fight with our hereditary lusts, let us remember that if we overcome their down drag we shall transfigure them into wings by which we may rise to higher flights than were otherwise possible. Dr. Fosdick has a fine paper entitled *Harnessing the Cave-man*. Assuming that the Cave-man was as rough a customer as certain anthropologists have supposed him to be,—Mr. Chesterton in his *Everlasting Man* takes a different conclusion, and it seems to me not without good grounds,—but assuming he was all the ruffian he is painted to be, Dr. Fosdick points out that we have a Cave-man within us all. But the true way to deal with him is not to kill him but "to harness him." Make him your beast of burden to carry the load of life which would otherwise be too much for you. "Our primitive instincts," he says, "are neither to be surrendered, nor stamped on. They are about the most valuable part of our native equipment. They are our original motive force and our business is not to crush them but to organize them around new purposes and direct them to new aims." Ambition, pugnacity, sensuality—these primitive instincts when organized around the Cross produced such lives as those of

Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther and Colonel Gardiner. It is not easy, but it can be done, and when it is done the result is more splendid than if you had had no Cave-man to fight.

This was something of the message Ezekiel had to give to the old dispirited exiles of Babylon. It was a heartsome one and made him the saviour of his people. It is his most permanent contribution to the splendid teaching of the Prophets. It has a message for you and me. Let us lay it to heart, and we shall find it as heartening to-day, enabling us to rise,

> "On stepping-stones
> Of our dead selves, to higher things."

## XVI

### THE EVANGELICAL PROPHET. (I) THE MESSAGE OF COMFORT

Comfort ye, comfort ye My people, saith your God.—ISAIAH xl. 1–4.

THESE words are now generally supposed to have been uttered by a great but unknown prophet who lived somewhere at the close of the Babylonian Exile. Jerusalem is still in ruins, and is now only a waste place inhabited by wild animals. The exiles of Babylon have many of them ceased to hope and some of them even to wish for a return. The nation is sunk in despair. The hope of David's House is quenched in dust.

It may seem strange that with the prophecies of Ezekiel before them this should have been so. Doubtless it was not so with them all, notably with this man who was to be his great successor. But it was so with many, as we learn from Ezra and Nehemiah. It needed a strong, militant voice to bid them "awake" and "put on their

strength," to "shake themselves from the dust"; and such a voice they certainly heard in this great prophet. He has been called "the evangelical prophet," and well does he deserve the title. Nowhere in the Old Testament do we have such a close approach to the New Testament as in these matchless pages of burning eloquence and tender pathos. In one of these flights he cries: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings!" and of none were the words more true than himself. Excepting the feet that were "nailed for our advantage to the bitter cross," there are none in the Bible more beautiful for God than those which bore those good tidings of salvation over the mountains of Judah.

In the words of our text the prophet strikes the keynote of this message. It is to be one of comfort. It is a beautiful word. None was ever more suited for the messenger of God. "What is the preaching for the age?" Joseph Parker once asked in a conference of ministers, and he replied, "The preaching to broken hearts."

It was true, and yet not perhaps the whole truth. To narrow the evangel to a message to bleeding hearts is to forget other things for which it stands, its message to the intellect and the conscience. It is to emphasize too much the

soothing side of comfort. For comfort as the Bible knows it means more than that. It means what is strengthening and inspiring. The very word itself tells us that. It is a Latin word composed of two roots, *con* and *fortis*, which mean "strong together with." It means the strength which a man gains by having someone else standing by him.

Now it was just this the prophet did for his generation. He told his broken-hearted people that there was Someone near Who had come to their help. Who was that? It was God Himself; He "that stretcheth out the heavens like a curtain," He that "giveth power to the faint, and to them that have no might increaseth strength." Why then should they fear? "Comfort ye, comfort ye My people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem." "Speak ye comfortably"—the words literally mean, "Speak ye *to the heart of Jerusalem*," and they were literally true of himself. No prophet has ever spoken more to the heart of his hearers than the evangelical prophet. There is a wooing tenderness in his voice, "a combination," says Dr. Driver, "of eloquence and pathos" that gives his words a unique beauty. It was this, of course, that made it so peculiarly adapted to his own age; but it is one which is suited for every age. As Dr. Parker

says, "There are broken hearts in every congregation, and the preacher that can reach these is speaking to the heart of every age."

Speaking to the heart of Jerusalem, what were the special elements of comfort he sought to bring to her?

I. First of all, he has to give her a *Message of Hope*. "Your warfare is accomplished." The long seventy years which Jeremiah had prophesied for her captivity were almost over. Her deliverer had already appeared. Cyrus, "my servant," has come! He is even now on his way to Babylon. Its gates shall crumble before him; and one of his first acts when he sits on the throne of Merodach will be to set the captives of Zion free.

It did not need much prescience to believe that Babylon would fall before the Persian monarch. What was remarkable was to predict that Cyrus should restore the exiles to their native land. For Cyrus was an idolater and knew nothing of the God of Israel. Yet this, we know, is what Cyrus did. He became unconsciously the servant of Jehovah, "guided by Him" Whom he did not know, to effect His great and gracious purposes.

One of the first and most comforting ways in which God gives strength to the fainting heart is this one of the prophet, when he tells it that *its warfare is accomplished*, that its trials are nearly

over and that if it holds on a little longer relief will come.

Many of you remember the joy that thrilled through our country on "Armistice Day." Who shall ever forget the gladness of that great night?

> "Such night in England ne'er has been and ne'er again shall be."

The thought that the long weary warfare of the years with its ceaseless slaughter was over, this was something to make the heart leap. Such hours come in the individual as well as in the national life. Sometimes they come in the "warfare" of our daily work. The student can never forget the hour when he saw his name posted up in the pass-list of the last examination he has had to face, and knew that the long struggle of his college years was successfully accomplished. The business man will never forget the day when, after years of weary apprenticeship, he attained to a partnership and felt that he was now going to reap the fruit of his toil. The literary man or the statesman knows it in the joy which comes to him when at length, after years of struggle, Fame places her coveted wreath upon his brow.

Or the struggle may be one with *pain*. Dr. Schweitzer tells in his missionary experiences of how one day in the hospital ward, in the dead of

night, as he was going round for the last time, he heard a poor negro crying out exultingly, "No more pain! No more pain!" He had just awakened from the chloroform after an operation for hernia to the glad consciousness that the agonizing pain he had suffered so long was now past. "No more pain!" "Your warfare is accomplished."

And what is the practical lesson God would give from that first great message of comfort? It is, if I address any here who may be passing through a long and severe course of trial, that God's promise to you, if you only hold on in faith and courage, is that the time will come, and it may not be far away, when you too will hear this word, "Your warfare is accomplished!" Hold on, then, in faith and hope. Do not give way to fear as, alas! so many do. Trust and be not afraid.

> "Wait thou His time; so shall this night
> Soon end in joyous day."

II. The second note of comfort which the prophet sounds in this chapter is one even deeper and grander than the first. It is *the note of Pardon*. Tell her, says the prophet speaking for God, that "her iniquity is pardoned."

The prophet is too honest to hide from his people that it is their iniquities which have been

the main cause of all their sorrows; but he now intervenes with the glad announcement that God has graciously cancelled the guilt of her past and cast it behind His back into the sea of His forgetfulness.

The reason which the prophet seems to give for this forgiveness is a strange one. It is that his people have already received more than sufficient for their sins, and that the time to forgive them is fully come. "For," reads our version, "she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins," that is to say, a punishment double to what they deserved. We must say this has always seemed to us a legal and unevangelical reason for the Divine Promise of Pardon. Besides, is it true? Can we ever say of any man that he receives double for all his sins? Do not we deserve all we get and far more? So at least Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel taught their hearers to believe.

We therefore adopt the translation which is given by Gesenius and Ewald when they render the words, "that she hath received of the Lord's hand double for all her *punishments*"; that is to say, a double compensation for all her sorrows. The meaning is the same as the prophet expresses in a later chapter. "For your shame ye shall receive double," that is double honour. Pardon, the prophet would teach us, is not mere remission

of penalty. It means also the rehabilitation of the pardoned. It is God preventing the returning Prodigal as he cries, "Make me thy hired servant," with the glad cry, "Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet."

So now does God speak to repentant Israel. "Your iniquity is pardoned; you shall receive of the Lord's hand double for all your punishment." A gracious future opens before the returning exiles of Zion. Their land shall be called Hephzibah and Beulah. Their sorrows shall be ended.

Why is this gracious message of Pardon so seldom heard in many churches? Is it because, as Sir Oliver Lodge says, people do not worry about their sins to-day? If it be so, they suffer a grievous loss. Men do not know how much their dullness and dispiritment are due to the fact that they are not right with God. When the palsied man was brought to Jesus, His first word to him was, "Be of good cheer, thy sins are forgiven thee." That was not the cheer which the man was specially looking for when he came to Christ, and yet Christ gave it to him first because it is the good cheer which precedes every other and is the secret of the truest comfort the soul can possess.

It is told in the life of Tennyson that once,

when lodging on the coast of Norfolk, his landlady came into the room in the morning with a peculiarly happy face. She had been so gloomy and even sullen before that the young poet was constrained to ask her if she had got "good news that morning."

"Yes," she replied, "last night I got the best of all news."

"And what is that?"

"That my sins have been all forgiven."

"But," said the poet banteringly, "there is nothing surely very new in that."

"Yes," she said, "but it's new to me, and it makes all things new."

If we wish to plumb the depths of God's love and rise with Him into the heights of His joy, this good news must have also been spoken to our hearts—"Your iniquities are pardoned."

III. But are there no conditions on which these messages of comfort can be alone secured? Yes, says the prophet, there are. The promises of God are offered you, but you must go forward to appropriate them. You must *take* the things that are freely given you of God.

This brings us to the practical message of the prophet in this and in many succeeding chapters of his prophecy. It is the call to awake, arise, and go forth from Babylon on the highway across

the desert to their native land. Hence he goes on to say, "The voice of Him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God."

As I have said, many of them were unwilling to do so. They had settled down in the land of their exile and had no desire to undertake the hardships and the dangers of a new exodus. It was the purpose of the prophet to rouse his people from their fatal lethargy, to bid them loose themselves from the bands of their necks and go forth in the way of the Lord.

But we cannot read his glowing prophecy without seeing that there is a far higher meaning in his words than a mere return to Palestine. The way of the Lord is no mere path to an earthly Zion; it is the way to a Heavenly City. It is not merely to set up a new Judaism on the ruins of the old that the prophet summons his people. It is to the foundation of a city of God whose function it is to be "a light to the Gentiles and salvation to the ends of the earth." This glorious universalism throbs through all his message. It must have been something too high for all but the finer spirits of his age to enter into. But that it did inspire some of them we know from the later prophets and psalms, and its full meaning was gloriously

reproduced when He came who was "the desire of all nations."

And what message has it for us? Does it not teach us that in going forward to obey the call of God strength will always be given for our tasks; nay, that in doing so we shall find a source of comfort which we shall fail to find elsewhere?

There is a great comfort in any kind of work. Zola, the French novelist, tells us that when he was in his deepest mental distress he found his salvation in work. "Often," he says, "I have gone to my work so utterly depressed that I could hardly drag myself to my desk. But when I have begun and got into my story I have forgotten my troubles in my work and found myself lifted above myself."

And if that be true of ordinary work, how much more of the work of God! John Bright tells us, in one of his speeches, that it was his public work that saved his reason, almost. When his wife died he was so depressed that he lost all relish for anything and sat in his empty house desolate and alone. But during one of these days Richard Cobden called on him and said, after listening to his tale of woe, "There are thousands of homes in England where there are dead husbands and dead wives and dead children, and they have died for the lack of bread. Now will you not come with me, when your first grief is past, and never rest

till that which has sent them to death is removed from the statute-book of our land?" He heard that voice, went forth on his campaign against the Corn Laws, and in doing so found comfort to his bleeding heart!

Prepare ye the way of the Lord, that is what I would say to all who are burdened with a crushing grief. Go forth to work for others. Comfort their bleeding hearts, and in doing so you will find that "the wilderness and the solitary place shall be made glad" for you, and "the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose."

# XVII

## THE EVANGELICAL PROPHET. (2) THE SUFFERING MESSIAH

He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied. —Isaiah liii. 11.

IN our previous study of this great prophet we saw that while his immediate purpose was to awaken the exiles of Babylon and arouse them to go forth to restore an earthly Jerusalem, he had yet a far deeper, more spiritual end in view. His real mission was to make them see that the New Jerusalem which they were to found was "a city of God" whose destiny was to be the elevation and salvation of all mankind. In developing this thought he makes use of a curious phrase. He calls Israel "the Servant of Jehovah" whom He has elected to be the light of all nations. The prophet has many striking passages in which he sets forth the glory of his people under this conception. Israel is personified as being chosen by God from all eternity to be the missionary of His Character and Will.

As he goes on, however, a change seems almost unconsciously to pass over the prophet's thought. The Personification of the nation becomes less prominent, and in its place there arises an ideal Personage, Who is to achieve in Himself that which the nation cannot do. Things are said of "the Servant of Jehovah" which could only naturally be applied to an individual person. This personification reaches its perfection in the famous "Fifty-third of Isaiah," which represents the climax of the prophet's thought. He there draws a picture of the ideal Servant of Jehovah which no nation could ever respond to. The question of the Ethiopean eunuch, erroneous as it is, at least represents the impression it irresistibly makes upon us as we read it. "Of whom speaketh the prophet this? Of himself or some other *man*?" It is evidently a man that is represented here, and the desperate attempts of some critics to see in it the personification of a nation fail to satisfy any plain reader. It can hardly be anything else than a Man that is here delineated.

It may be objected, it has been objected to this interpretation, Why then does the prophet change his view of the "Servant of Jehovah," and what led him to such a change? The answer to this lies in the nature of the book. It is not a series of historical prophecies such as we find in

Isaiah or Jeremiah, each with its own definite event behind it. It is rather a series of poetical meditations, addressed indeed to a general historical situation, but not definitely called forth by any particular event. The prophet broods over his great theme, and as he does so, it expands and changes in his hands. This Fifty-third of Isaiah, or as we should more correctly describe it, the section beginning at the thirteenth verse of the fifty-second chapter and going on to the end of the fifty-third, is itself a poem. It is in no ordinary sense a prophecy. It is a prophetic poem; but its tone is lyrical throughout, and it has been truly called "The Song of the Suffering Servant of Jehovah."

In such a poem there would be no occasion for saying why the prophet had passed on from the Personification of a nation to a Person in it. But elsewhere there are traces of the reason why he was led to do so. It was his growing perception of the fact that the nation as he found it was not competent to rise to this high ideal. One of his most curious references to the Servant of the Lord is that in which he speaks of him as being "blind" and "deaf." "Who is blind, but my servant? or deaf, as my messenger that I sent?" (Isa. xlii. 19). "The context here shows that the Servant is the whole people, but they are entitled

Servant only to show how unfit they are for their task."[1]

Thus, as the first Isaiah was led to his Messianic Hope through the consciousness that nothing else could save his country, so the second Isaiah is led to a similar conclusion. Not the nation, nor even an ideal part of the nation, but an ideal representative of the nation becomes for the prophet the ultimate Messiah after whom his hopes reach out.

I have called this ideal representative of the nation "the Messiah," and in so doing I am supported not only by the Jewish Talmud before Christ but by the whole of the New Testament and by the Saviour Himself. And such the "Servant" truly is. His work is essentially Messianic. He is to be the Saviour of His people just as the Wonderful Child was to be. Nevertheless, as we read this chapter we cannot but see how vastly different are the two conceptions. Isaiah's Messiah is an *Ideal King*, Who is to save His people by the conquest of their enemies and a subsequent rule of righteousness. The Evangelical Prophet's Messiah is a great *Prophet*, who is to save His people by suffering

[1] Sir George Adam Smith, *Isaiah*, ii, p. 263.—A strong contender for the view that the suffering servant is a person, not a personification.

patiently and, more, by suffering vicariously. He is to take their sins upon His back and bear them for them.

The marvellous originality of such a conception need hardly be insisted on. It was something new, absolutely new in the history of the race. How this prophet came to it we do not know. Perhaps he was led to it by the sufferings of his great predecessor, Jeremiah; but, in any case, his conception of a suffering Messiah must have "astonied" them as much as it did the kings of the earth, and it remained an unsolved enigma until there arose One Who calmly appropriated it in all its demands and began His ministry by saying of it, "This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears."

Passing now to a closer examination of this Song of the Suffering Servant of Jehovah, we note that it begins with the announcement that this Sufferer, in spite of all His sufferings and indeed His cruel death, is to achieve His purpose and be what the world would call a successful Man. "Behold," begins the prophet, "my servant shall deal prudently and prosperously." (The word in the original means the wisdom that meets with the success it deserves.) "He shall be exalted and extolled and be very high." Make no mistake about it, the prophet would say, the Servant may

take a strange way to win success, but it will be a wise one. He shall gain what He seeks. His life shall illustrate the truth of Paul's words, "The weakness of God is stronger than men, and the foolishness of God is wiser than men."

The prophet then goes on to speak of *the World's amazement at the sight of a Suffering Messiah.* The kings are struck dumb with the spectacle. Nothing like this was ever seen before, yet they are compelled to admit that the pathway the Sufferer has taken has led to unparalleled glory. That which neither history nor poem had ever said or sung was now witnessed; weakness, insignificance and death crowned with universal empire.

How strikingly this reception by the world of a crucified Saviour was fulfilled in the early history of Christianity I need not say. Contempt, amazement, persecution, and finally capitulation and adoration marked its progress. Paul again sums it up when he says, "We preach a crucified Messiah; to the Jews a stumbling-block and to the Greeks foolishness; but to us who believe, a Messiah who is the power of God and the wisdom of God."

The reception by the Jews of this Saviour is now the theme of the prophet. It, too, is one of incredulity and rejection. Few were the people

who should listen to the message when it was first proclaimed. Fewer still, to see "the Arm of the Lord" in this insignificant and feeble figure. He was like a withered plant in a desert. In appearance He had nothing to attract. Weak and sickly, He was to live among men, "a Man of sorrows and acquainted with griefs."

The word "griefs" means literally "sicknesses," and the meaning of the prophet would seem to be that the Servant of Jehovah is to include among His other sufferings the weight of some cruel and loathsome disease. If this be so, there will be a reluctance on the part of many to receive it as a literal prophecy. As G. A. Smith says, "Jesus was no Job." We have no record of sickness in His brief ministry, and it would seem that He could not have been other than a healthy man to do the work He did. But perhaps, as Matthew suggests, the sicknesses He bore were only conceived by the prophet as borne in sympathy and He "carried" them not in the sense of suffering under them, but to cure them, to carry them away.

As the prophet broods over the sorrows of the Suffering Servant, his language rises to its tenderest and most moving lines: "He was despised and rejected of men: a man of sorrows, and acquainted with sickness; and we hid as it

were our faces from Him. He was despised and we esteemed Him not."

Nay, more than "despised." The prophet goes on to speak of the tragic misconception of His character and mission, which was to be made by His own nation. Contempt passes into suspicion, aversion, and at last into positive hatred. Men began to suspect He was a malefactor since He suffered so. As Job's friends had seen in the sufferings of their friend a proof that he must have committed some terrible sin of which they were unaware, so in the sufferings of this Man His people saw one who was "stricken and smitten of God." Finally, their hatred has no bounds, and issues in His judicial murder. "He was taken from prison and from judgment and wrenched out of the land of the living." Such was the reception which His own were to give to their greatest and noblest Prophet.

But it was all a terrible mistake. He was indeed "stricken of God," but was it because of His own sins? No; and in this the prophet rises to the crown and climax of his prophecy: it was because of our sins. He was taking our place and bearing on His own back the punishment that should have fallen upon us. "He was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. The discipline of our peace,

that discipline which brings peace to us, was upon Him, and with His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep had gone astray, but the Lord caused to light upon Him the iniquity of us all." In a word, the sufferings of the Servant of Jehovah were vicarious sufferings. He died that we might live.

All this was unknown to the men of His generation, even to His own disciples. But there was One to Whom it was no mystery. It was to the Sufferer Himself. What was the attitude of the Servant to His own sufferings? It was one of meek and yet majestic silence. "He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep dumb before her shearers, so He opened not His mouth." Suffering in the Old Testament is always vocal. It either expresses itself in confession or expostulation. It either sees in its sufferings a proof of its own demerit and cries, "Have mercy upon me, O God . . . for I acknowledge my transgressions. My sin is ever before me," or else, like Job conscious of its own innocence, it loudly challenges God in a magnificent "Why?"

But the Suffering Servant does none of these things. He is simply silent. "He openeth not His mouth." Why was this? "Because," says the prophet, "He had no need to speak." He

knew the secret of these sufferings. He knew that they were not for His own sins but for the sins of others, that they might go free, and He knew that in this they would be gloriously successful. "When Thou shalt make His soul an offering for sin," says the prophet, speaking now to God, "He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in His hand." That which ancient sacrifice, and especially the Lamb of atonement, had dimly foreshadowed, was now to be realized in the Suffering Servant of Jehovah, "the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world."

That, concludes the prophet, was the great secret which enabled the Divine Sufferer to maintain His course calm and triumphant to the end. He knew what He was to achieve by these sufferings and in that knowledge He rejoiced. "He shall see of the travail of His soul and be satisfied."

"The travail of *His soul.*" How true these words were of Jesus! His bodily sufferings were not small. All His life He was "a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." He died one of the most painful deaths human malignity could devise. But it was not these that pressed upon His spirit most sorely. "When the sharp nails went through," instead of breaking out into cries of execration or anguish, He breathed forth

a prayer of forgiveness and love. It was not the sufferings of His body that tried Him most. It was "the travail of His soul." As He faints under the burden of Gethsemane, He lets us see what it was that crushed Him to the earth. "My *soul* is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death."

What is the meaning of it? Others had suffered things as great as He, and yet gone into it singing. "This is a goodly neckerchief," said Alice Drever, touching the chain around her neck as she went to the stake, "God be praised for it." "Now shall I ascend in a fiery chariot to God," said John Bradford, as he faced the faggots. "I take God to witness," said a Scottish martyr, "that I have often climbed my pulpit stairs with more perturbation than I now climb this gallows."

Why was it different with the noblest martyr of them all? Was it not because He was bearing a burden they never had to carry? Does not the prophet pierce to the heart of the matter when he says, "Thou shalt make *His soul* an offering for sin," and when the Saviour contemplated His sufferings past, this was what He saw in them as the climax of them all. "He shall see of the travail of His soul."

"And shall be satisfied." Great as these sufferings are, the Saviour, when He sees what they have won, shall say, "It was well worth them

all." "He shall be satisfied"—the words may be regarded as prophetic or retrospective. They may be looked on as a picture of the prevision of the Sufferer as He went forward to His task. So the writer to the Hebrews pictures Him, when "for the joy set before Him He endured the Cross." But I am inclined rather to regard them as retrospective. The prophet paints the Suffering Servant looking back on His great task and then thinks of what it has effected with a thrill of satisfaction. Yes, it was worth it all.

He shall be satisfied, satisfied with the great work of redemption which these sufferings have achieved. "Satisfied" with the *number* of those redeemed by them. "And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne . . . and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing." When the Saviour hears that, He is satisfied.

And He shall be satisfied, too, with the *character* of the redeemed. When He sees these, not merely the wise and the innocent, but the poor and the sinful, men dug from the very pit of destruction and built up into noble living stones

in the Temple of the Redeemed, He shall be satisfied, too. When He sees in that company sinners like the Magdalene and the penitent thief coming from every age to tell of His wonderful redemption, that will give Him a rare joy of satisfaction.

And He shall be satisfied, too, with *joy* of the redeemed when He learns of the peace and comfort which His Name has brought to sufferers in every age, how that from His Cross there has flowed a river of healing into broken hearts and wounded spirits in every age; that, too, will be to Him a secret of satisfaction, rare and ineffable.

"He shall see of the travail of His soul, and be satisfied"—brothers, can He say that of you and me? Alas! as we look into our lives how often must we feel that the Suffering Saviour must see little in our lives to minister to His satisfaction! Shall not the contemplation of these sufferings awaken within us a noble desire to fill up that which is still lacking in the sufferings of Christ, His sense that all that He did for us has not been wasted on us?

"I gave my life for thee,
My precious blood I shed
That thou mightst ransomed be,
Delivered from the dead.
I gave My life for thee:
What hast thou given for Me?"

"Therefore will I divide Him a portion with the great, and He shall divide the spoil with the strong." The prophet closes his meditation on the major key with which he opened it. This is no dirge. This is no elegy. It is a song of triumphant faith. Is it not wonderful to think how strikingly it has been fulfilled in the history of Christ and Christianity? These words were spoken at least four hundred years before Christ was born. They were fulfilled almost exactly in the life and death of the Man of Nazareth during His sojourn on the earth. They are being continued to be fulfilled ever since. Surely in view of such a fact the argument from prophecy is one which is too little regarded to-day. Surely in view of it every candid thinker, be he Jew or Gentile, ought to consider it afresh and put to himself the question of the Ethiopian eunuch, "Of whom speaketh the prophet this?" Prof. A. B. Davidson has truly said of this chapter that "it is a Christian picture set in a Hebrew frame." The frame, as we have seen, is as wonderful as it is beautiful. But who but God could have set the Picture within it?

# XVIII

## THE PROPHET AS TEMPLE-BUILDER

Be strong, all ye people of the land, saith the Lord, and work: for I am with you.—HAGGAI ii. 4.

HAGGAI is the great Temple-builder among the prophets. Almost all his little book is taken up with this theme. His prophecies were addressed to the exiles, some fifteen years after their return to Jerusalem. In their first enthusiasm they had set up the great altar of burnt offering and laid the foundations of the house of the Lord amid a mingled song of triumph and of tears. Since then, however, little had been done; partly owing to Samaritan jealousy, but chiefly to indifference.

In the first chapter of his prophecy, Haggai chides them for this. "Is it a time for you to dwell in ceiled houses, while the House lieth waste?" So long as God's House is neglected, they will have no prosperity. All they earn will be deposited in "a bag with holes."

It is a new thing in prophecy, to see one of "the goodly fellowship" taking an interest in the

Temple. To Amos and Isaiah and Jeremiah the Temple was a small thing, compared with righteousness of life and faith in God. Haggai has been depreciated for his interest in merely outward things. Dean Farrar, for example, speaks of his poverty of thought and prosaic diction.[1] But in this he is doing Haggai an injustice. Other times need other methods. In Isaiah's age, there was no need to emphasize the value of external ritual. What was required was to make men feel the importance of inward holiness. But in Haggai's time, the Temple was the nucleus of the national life. If it was to be preserved, the Temple must be preserved. His work was not, of course, so spiritual as that of the older prophets, but it was a real work for God nevertheless. It was a necessary link in the chain of monotheistic faith. It was a milestone on the road that led to Christ.

Haggai's message had an immediate result. The people at once resumed the restoration of the House of the Lord; but they did not go far without being again much discouraged. They contrasted the glory of the former House with that of the latter. Some were old enough to remember the splendour of Solomon's Temple with its blue and purple and scarlet hangings, with its marble pavement and its cedar linings, with its sea of brass

[1] *The Minor Prophets.*

and its sculptured columns. They contrasted all this with the present ugly walls of old and undressed stones covered over with the coarsest of tent-coverings. It was more like a cow-shed than a Temple. "Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? and how do ye see it now? is it not in your eyes as nothing?" They were tempted to give it up as a hopeless business. But it was now Haggai came forward with his second message. "Be strong, all ye people of the land, and work," he cries: "for I am with you, saith the Lord of hosts: according to the word which I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remaineth with you: fear ye not."

Haggai's first encouragement is based *on the continuity of God*. God had not forgotten His old Covenant which He had made with their fathers long ago. The same Jehovah that had led them forth from Egypt with a mighty arm was with them still, if they would only trust Him. Such a thought is always a source of strength to the soul. George Dawson of Birmingham has a fine prayer: "We pray Thee that no greatness of ancient testimony may ever hide from us the sense of Thy continued presence still." As we read these old stories of miracles and other wondrous deeds done in the Bible, we are apt to think that these things have no relation to us. "Miracles,"

we say, "do not happen." But this is a false conclusion. Ours is the same conflict as our fathers had to fight. Ours may be the same faith and ours also shall be the same glorious victory. "My Spirit remaineth with you." Haggai's call to work is not only based on Israel's past: it has also an outlook to her future. Haggai was a great optimist. He had no sympathy with those who idolize the past in order to depreciate the present. He did not at all agree with those who said that all the glory of their nation lay behind it. Great as the glory of Israel's past had been, he believed there lay a still greater glory for her in the future. God had shaken Mount Sinai in the past when He had delivered the law to Moses; "but yet once more," and He would shake not the earth only but the heavens also, and as a result of that shaking all the nations of the earth would fear the Lord and bring their most costly treasures to His Temple. The latter glory of the House would be greater than the former. "And in this place will I give peace, saith the Lord," concludes Haggai.[1]

This prophecy was literally fulfilled in the wonderful gifts that were given to the Temple not only by Artaxerxes and Darius, but in later days by many foreign princes who came to Jerusalem

[1] ii, 9.

moved by an intense curiosity in and a wistful admiration of her wonderful history and literature. But above all they were fulfilled by the strangest of all benefactors, the cruel Herod the Great, who lavished his treasures on its restoration. Enriched both by him and by the gifts of the wealthy Jews of the Dispersion, the Temple became at the Christian Era a worthy rival to the glory of Solomon's House.

It was a wonderful thing that Haggai should foresee this, that he should believe that in that lowly Temple, there was the beginning of another and glorious, if troubled, chapter in the history of the nation. But while this is true, I do not think we are exhausting the full meaning of his words, when we limit them to a future of material wealth and splendour. For notice what he says: "In this place will I give peace, saith the Lord." What did he mean by that? Probably a reiteration of the ancient prophecies of Micah and Isaiah, that the Lord's House should in the latter days be the centre of a League of Nations for the extermination of war. But if he meant that only, his prophecy was not fulfilled. Zion's Temple was alas! never the scene of such a gathering. The second Temple was like the first, destined to pass away in blood and fire.

But as Emerson says somewhere, "He builded

better than he knew," so Haggai was building better than he knew when he said: "Yet once . . . and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land; and I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the Lord. The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine, saith the Lord. The glory of this latter house shall be greater than the former; and in this place will I give peace." These words have usually been understood as a deliberate prophecy of Christ. He was "the Desire of all nations," whose coming was to make the glory of the latter House greater than the former.

Well, as I have indicated, I do not think we can honestly take that view. The word "Desire" in the original is plural, not singular, and means "the desirable things of all nations," and these, as the context shows, are their silver and gold.

But when the prophet goes on to add, "In this place will I give peace," we are obviously lifted up into a more spiritual region and compelled to feel that the true reason why the glory of the latter House was to be greater than the former was that there was to come to it One Who was indeed the most desirable blessing for all the nations, One Who was to give them a gift more precious than silver or gold, the gift of the Peace of God.

Yes, the glory of the latter House was indeed greater than the former, but why? Not because of its golden candlestick or sacred ark, not because of its beautiful gates or ageless walls, not because of its sacred priests or gorgeous worship; but because one day a peasant woman brought into it a little Child over whose head an aged prophet gave utterance to the words, "Now Lord, lettest thou Thy servant depart in peace, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation;" because in after days there was to stand within its walls One Who should say, "I am the light of the world: he that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."

In closing, what is the practical lesson we are taught by Haggai? It is the lesson to be strong in the work of the Lord. We are all Temple-builders, or may be, in a grander sense than Haggai knew. His message to the old Jerusalemites is the same as God would give to us: "Be strong, and work: for I am with you, saith the Lord of Hosts." There are three ways in which we may be strong in the work of the Lord;—in *the nation*, in *the Church* and in *the individual life*.

I. As regards our work for God in *the nation*, we are called upon to be fellow-workers with Him in building up that Temple of a redeemed

Humanity of which the corner-stones are righteousness in social life and peace among the nations. Blake has finely said in well-known lines:

"And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green?
And was the holiest Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?
And did the Countenance divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerus'lem builded here
Among those dark Satanic mills?
Bring me my bow of burning gold!
Bring me my arrows of desire!
Bring me my spear! O clouds unfold,
Bring me my chariot of fire!
I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land."

We are sometimes, like Haggai's contemporaries, given to contrast our present age with the glorious men and deeds of the nineteenth century, and perhaps in some respects we are right to do so. There were giants in those days. Yet there are two respects in which the glory of these latter days may be greater than the former. There may be a deeper sense of social righteousness than there was in that age of remorseless competition, and there may be a greater will to peace. We

have had in this century the greatest war history has ever known. There would not be much perhaps to be proud of in that—though I for my part will never cease to be proud of the valour and sacrifice of our boys then—were it not that it may be made the greatest step the world has ever taken in the achievement of peace among men. To attain that would be to make the twentieth century the greatest since the Christian Era, and we are called never to cease from mental fight till we have built that Temple in Earth's pleasant land.

II. Again, another sphere of the work of God in which we are called on to be strong, is in the *building up of His Church*. The Church is the body of Christ. It is that by which His Spirit is made known in the world, and therefore if we love Christ, we ought to love and work for His Church. Such a work, as the prophet reminds us here, is a means of blessing to ourselves as well as to others. Adam Black the publisher tells that shortly after he came to London he became a member of the Church he attended. "I found," he says, "that this step gave stability to my character and proved a defence from follies and vices, into which as a young man in London, with no one to guide me, I might otherwise have fallen."

It is good for a young man to join the Church;

but it is better to do some work for it. By such work he will not only do good to others but develop useful talents of speech and intellectual culture which might otherwise lie dormant. Above all he will gain a firm grasp of the truths he professes. You cannot teach the truth to others, without being taught yourself. You cannot ask others to live for God without seeking to live for God yourself.

One reason why so many members of our Churches are weak and sickly Christians, is that they take no exercise. The working Christian is the healthy Christian. The lazy Christian is the languid Christian, the critic, the nominalist, the indifferentist, the man who has a name to live but is really as dead as Queen Anne.

III. Perhaps, however, you have neither time nor talents for Church work so-called. Well, then, there is a third sphere of work in which you can be in a true sense a worker for God. It is in the sphere of *the individual life*, either in your business, or in your homes, or most of all in the secrets of your own hearts, in what I would call *the Temple of the Spirit*. God forbid that we should limit the Temple of God to this congregation or any other congregation or that collection of congregations which we call "the visible Church." The Christian Temple is circum-

scribed by no earthly creed or sect. It is as wide as Humanity. Its walls are salvation and its gates praise. As the American poet has truly sung:

> "City of God, how broad and far
> Outspread thy walls sublime!
> The true, thy chartered freemen are
> Of every age and clime."

Wherever we find a man who is fighting for what is true and honest and of good report, who is striving to spread abroad the empire of freedom, love and truth, there we find a true builder of the Temple made without hands, eternal in the heavens. Wherever we see a soul fighting its battle against evil either in itself or among those within the circle of its influence, there we see a true fellow-worker with God. Are we to be numbered among these? Some of us are hard enough workers for ourselves. We have made our pile and we have deserved to do so, because we have worked hard for it. But are we *workers together with God*? That is the great work. That is the only work that will endure the test of time. All the rest is amassing wealth to be put into "a bag with holes," that will one day gape open its contents and drop them into a grave. "The silver and the gold are Mine, saith the Lord"; the silver that will never take wings and fly away, the gold

that will never canker. Oh, that we were workers for such a wealth! Oh, that we were builders of such a Temple! Ours then would be the blessedness of this promise: "Be strong, and work: for I am with you, saith the Lord. According to the word which I covenanted with you when ye came out of Egypt, so My Spirit remaineth with you: fear ye not."

# XIX

## ZECHARIAH: THE ENCOURAGER

Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord.—ZECHARIAH iv. 6.

LIKE Haggai, his contemporary, Zechariah was a great church-builder; but he was much more. He was a great encourager as well, and his wonderful visions, which form the greater part of his prophecy, are full of the spirit of good cheer.[1] He believed that a good time was coming for his people, an era of peace and enlargement in which the city, that had once run red with blood, would be "filled with boys and girls playing in the streets thereof"; and in which walls would be no longer needed, for Jehovah Himself would be "a wall of fire" round about. All that was needed was to put their trust in God and keep in close touch with Him. Then every mountain of difficulty would "become a plain," for "it is not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord."

[1] We accept the view that chapters ix.–xiv. belong to a later date.

It is to Zerubbabel, the Governor of Jerusalem, that our prophet gives this heart-stirring message. Like Bunyan, he couches it in the form of a dream, or night-vision, which he represents God as sending him, to encourage the heart of this somewhat feeble "prince of the house of David."

He begins by telling that an angel had roused him from his sleep and shown him a wonderful seven-branched Golden Candlestick, or rather Lamp-stand, for there were no candles in those days. This seven-branched Lamp was one of the most sacred elements of the Regalia of Israel. It stood in the Holy Place and was believed to have been designed by Moses in the wilderness. It had, however, been carried away to Babylon and apparently not restored with the other vessels of the Temple. Hence its presence in the vision of Zechariah was meant to reassure Zerubbabel and the nation. The temple would be rebuilt and the sacred Lamp would shed, as of old, its radiance over the shrine; a symbol of that light of truth which the Jewish faith was to shed abroad over a world of darkness. It may be remarked that Zechariah's prophecy was fulfilled, to the extent at least that if the old candlestick was not recovered, a new one was set up in its place. It was found there by Titus when he destroyed the city for the last time and rescued it from the flames. It was carried

by him to Rome and formed part of his triumphal entry there, and its image can still be seen sculptured on his famous Triumphal Arch, built by Vespasian in honour of his son.

But this sacred Lamp which Zechariah now sees in the new Temple is not quite the same as the old one. It has certain wonderful features about it. For one thing, its vessel is not placed beneath the Lamp, as is usually the case. It is fixed at the top of it; and for another thing, and this more remarkable, *it is a self-filling lamp*. The old Lamp had been filled night and morning by the priests; for it was a light that never went out; but in this Lamp such a service is no longer needed. It has its reservoir above it, like a fountain-pen, and that reservoir is inexhaustible because it is in touch with Nature herself.

This brings us to another strange feature in this vision. Behind the Lamp the prophet sees two olive trees growing in the midst of the Holy Place on either side of the Lamp, and these trees have the wonderful property of distilling their oil right into the oil-vessel by two golden branch-like pipes, which connect them with it.

Of course you will say all this is fantastically impossible. There is no engineer who could ever make an olive tree distil its oil straight into an oil-tank. And that is true. The vision is but "the

fabric of a dream." It is not meant to be real. But the truth contained in the vision is real, and that truth is this, that the *living Church of a living God is in contact with an inexhaustible supply.*

Nature is inexhaustible. She knows no weariness. Year by year, Spring by Spring, she pours forth from her affluent bosom the fullness of a never-failing life.

I remember Edward Caird, the Master of Balliol, giving expression to that reflection, when presented with his portrait by his old students on his departure from Glasgow to Oxford. "As I grow older," he said, "I feel more and more the wonder of Nature's freshness. Every year she pours into my classes a fresh flow of young and ardent life, with minds as keen and eyes as interested as when I first came here twenty years ago."

It is this inexhaustible fertility of Nature that becomes here a parable of Grace. "Even the youths shall faint and grow weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: but they that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; they shall walk, and not faint."

"You," says the prophet to Zerubbabel, "have your hill of difficulty to climb, but you need not faint upon it. If you do, it is because you do not realize your possibilities. You are like a man

dying of thirst, when at his side there is a pipe in touch with Loch Katrine. Depend on your own strength and you will fail. But keep in touch with God and you cannot fail." "Who art thou, O great mountain? Before Zerubbabel thou shalt become a plain:" for "it is not by might nor by power but by My Spirit, saith the Lord."

Is not that a message we all need to lay to heart? Things go wrong with us at home or in our business. Loved ones whose presence in our life gave our work all its relish are taken away. Our work yields poorer and still poorer returns every year. We are growing old, and the things we hoped to achieve are undone. We are tempted to say, "I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for naught and in vain." It is at such times the prophet would say to us, "Who hath despised the day of small things? Fear not, and let your hands be strong." If you only knew it you have at your very side an inexhaustible supply, the oil of God's own Spirit to keep the lamp of life burning with never-failing effulgence.

Why then is it that men who have at their side such an overflowing reservoir of light and power, nevertheless fail to use it and become, like Zerubbabel, unproductive instruments for God? That brings us to a feature in this vision, on which we

have not yet touched, *the channels between this inexhaustible supply and the burning Lamps.*

As the prophet continues to look at this wonderful Lamp-stand, his attention is directed to two branches which lead from the olive trees and conduct the sap into the oil vessel at the top of the Lamp. He again addresses the interpreting angel and asks, "What be these two olive branches which through the golden pipes empty the golden oil into the Lamp?" The answer is that they are the human channels between the Tree of Life and the Lamp of Light. "These are the two anointed ones, which stand before the Lord of the whole earth."

Historically, these "anointed ones" can only mean Zerubbabel himself and Joshua the High Priest, to whom the previous vision was addressed. They were the two men who stood before God as the representatives of the nation, the one on its civil, the other on its religious side. They were therefore the channels through which God's grace was to flow into the nation. Hence it was only as they kept themselves pure in life and strong in faith, that the nation would be kept pure and strong. The lesson, therefore, of the vision is obvious. Let Zerubbabel keep pure and strong, in other words, let him keep in close touch with the Tree of Life, and no difficulty can ever over-

come him. The great mountain will become a plain and the hands that began the work fifteen years before will finish it, moved by a power that is all of grace. "He shall bring forth the headstone with shoutings of Grace, grace unto it" (R.V.).

There is a lesson here for the nation. A people that wishes to keep the standard of life high and pure should see to it that its leaders are men of honour and rectitude. The example of high places is contagious. Our Joshuas and Zerubbabels must be men of character if the peoples they lead are to be the same. The United States of America has always insisted that her President should be a good man. A nation that enthrones goodness, honours God and will be blest in its men, but a nation that makes little of goodness and honours talent more than character is one that dethrones God and is poisoned at the very fountain-head of its corporate life.

But the lesson which I would specially emphasize here is in the individual life. If you and I are to achieve any work for God, we must be in constant touch with Him. As our Lord points out in his Parable of the Ten Virgins, the oil of perseverance needs constantly to be replenished, no human lamp can contain enough for the whole of life. It is bound to go out, unless it has a

vessel that contains an infinite supply. And what vessel can contain that? Only the Spirit of God, the Spirit of an inexhaustible life and power, pouring His never-failing fullness into our life, "grace for grace."

But that He may do so, we must keep the channel clean. Neither Joshua nor Zerubbabel, the prophet delicately suggests in this and the former vision, was an uninterrupted channel of God's Spirit. Thus it was that their work was spasmodic and intermittent, flickering like a dying light. Is it not too often so with us? God's fullness is not getting into our life because the channels of supply are clogged with sin or unbelief.

I remember, if a homely illustration may be permitted, once cycling along a dark road in the gathering night. I had a well-filled lamp, however, and had little fear I should fail to find my way. But gradually my light got dimmer and dimmer, until at last there was just enough to keep me out of the hands of the policeman, and before I got home it went out altogether. "The oil must have leaked out," I said to myself, but when I opened the vessel it was still full. Then I went to the man who had sold me the lamp and said, "How is it you sold me this as a 'King of the Road,' and to me it is only a monarch of darkness?" He examined the lamp and said, "There's nothing

wrong with the lamp; but the wick has got clogged. You are using too thick an oil and too large a wick. You must get a cleaner oil and keep the channel clean. The light has been quenched by the oil that should have fed it."

"Which things are an allegory." The power is there, but the channel is at fault. The golden pipe that unites the Olive Tree of the divine grace with the human lamp, has got choked up and hence these spiritual decadences and often open backslidings that mark so many on our Church Rolls, men and women who began life's "watches" with a brightly shining light but in the second or third watch have sadly to confess, "Our lamps have gone out."

And what then, it may be asked, is needed to keep the channel open? I would reply, Two things: Faith in God and Repentance from known sin, or more shortly prayer and purity.

We need first of all earnest, persevering prayer, if the oil of grace is to pour its radiance on our lamp of life. Prayer may be regarded as the act that turns the spigot by which any oil can get into the human channel at all. Is not that the truth Jesus proclaims to His disciples when He promises them the gift of the Holy Spirit. "Tarry," He tells them, "until ye be endued with power from on high." The disciples were to wait in prayer

until "the promise of the Father" was fulfilled. The command was faithfully obeyed and the result was the outpouring of Pentecost, when they were indeed made to feel the truth of this ancient word that it is "not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord," that the Lamp of Power is to be obtained.

It is a message that is always applicable. What the Church needs perhaps more than anything else is a believing and therefore persevering prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Then God's promise to bless His children will not fail. For this is Christ's own word: "If ye, being evil, know how to give good things unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit unto them that ask Him!"

Prayer for the Holy Spirit will not fail, but before its answer is experienced, may reveal to us the reason why a life full of good intentions and gifts is an unproductive life for God. That reason will likely lie in the presence of some obstacle in the golden pipes. In other words, the stream of the divine grace is checked in its flow by the presence of some unsurrendered sin in our hearts. Until that is taken away, the Spirit can find no entrance there. If there be an Achan in the camp, there will be no success in the battle-front.

And so Zechariah concludes his message with a call to repentance: "Speak ye every man the truth to his neighbour; and let none of you imagine evil in your hearts, and love no false oath: for all these are things that I hate, saith the Lord" (viii. 16, 17).

Prayer and Repentance, the waiting for God's Spirit and the preparation of the heart to receive Him—let these two conditions be fulfilled and then the promise of Him who walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks will be fulfilled: "I am the Light of the World. He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."

"Light of the world, for ever ever shining,
There is no change in Thee.
True light of life, all joy and health enshrining,
Thou canst not fade nor flee.

## XX

### MALACHI: THE REFORMER

Unto you that fear My name shall the Sun of Righteousness arise with healing in His wings.—MALACHI iv. 2.

SEVENTY years had passed since the voice of the prophet had been heard in the land. They were years of almost complete silence in the history of Israel. All we can gather is that they had been years of disillusion and retrogression. At first indeed, under the inspiration of Haggai and Zechariah, the exiles had gone to their task with a new hope. The Temple had been finished and the ancient worship restored.

But this religious ardour had gradually died away. Zerubbabel passed away and left no successor. With him "the stem of Jesse" seems to have finally withered. This seeming falsification of prophetic hopes, along with their poverty and insignificance, deeply depressed the little colony. The optimism of Zechariah seemed very cheap in the light of the actual facts of the situation. A spirit of moral indifference and even religious

scepticism crept over the nation, involving priest and people alike.

The people neglected worship, saying, "Behold what a weariness it is! And what good does it do? Are we any better than the heathen because of it?" The priests went through the services in so half-hearted a fashion that it would have been better to shut the doors of the House altogether and put an end to the hollow farce.

In such an hour did Malachi arise to sound forth his call to repentance. It has been suggested by some scholars that he came after Ezra and Nehemiah and interpreted their ideas. But this is not the least likely. Had there been any trace of spiritual revival, we may be sure Malachi would have referred to it and probably mentioned Ezra and Nehemiah as Zechariah did Zerubbabel. But there is no sign of them in his entire prophecy. He spoke in a time of spiritual darkness, and it is all the more credit to him that speaking at such a time he did so not only with courage but also with hope. He was a real Reformer, and it was due to the quickening of conscience that he created that Ezra was either induced to come or when he did come gained the success he attained, in translating Malachi's ideals into actual facts.

Though, as our text indicates, there is an

element of hope in Malachi's prophecy, yet living as he did in a corrupt age, his book, especially at the first, has a tone of gloom. In this he differs much from his predecessor. Zechariah is an encourager: Malachi is a rebuker. Both have their place in the Kingdom of God; but it may be questioned whether the second is not the greater, at least in character. Any preacher to the masses can be an encourager, but it takes a prophet to be a rebuker.

I. Malachi's first indictment is *against the priesthood.* Unlike the earlier prophets, in the emphasis he lays on the worthy observance of the Temple ritual, he resembles them in his insistence on the hollowness of insincerity of worship. He contrasts the poverty of their services with that of the Heathen. Even though their knowledge of God is so imperfect, yet "from the rising of the sun to the going down of the same, My name is great among the Gentiles." This is a remarkable word and in its catholicity recalls that of St. Peter, "In every nation, he that feareth God and worketh righteousness is accepted by Him." In contrast to this how miserable was their service! They were "profaning the table of the Lord" by offering what was blind and lame and diseased at His altar. Worse than that, they were giving what they knew had been gained "by violence."

How different in other days, when the priest was a man of holy life! "The law of truth was in his mouth, and unrighteousness was not found in him: he walked with God in uprightness, and turned many away from iniquity." But now, instead of helping the people to be good, they caused them to stumble. "Ye have corrupted the covenant of Levi," says the prophet. "Therefore have I made you contemptible before all the people."

It takes a bold man to speak thus. It is not a safe thing to make an enemy of the priesthood. We know of One Who did this in later days and was greeted with the cry, "Let Him be crucified."

It is a sad fact that the official guardians of religion are often its deadliest foes. "Satan" is never more truly "changed into an angel of light" than when the ministers of God, either by the corruptness of their life or their unfaithfulness to His message, lead the flock of which they should be the shepherds away from the true fold into the paths of destruction. This was the battle Luther had to fight at the Reformation; but the need of it is not confined to his time. One of the greatest needs of the Church to-day is for a Malachi to arise and "purify the sons of Levi."

II. Having scourged the priesthood, Malachi now turns *to the people*. He has the same things

to say about their worship as he said about the priests. He calls them "robbers of God" because they had kept back the tithes which they owed to the Treasury. He repeats the promise so often made in the Old Testament, that if they will not forget God, God will not forget them. "Prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven, and pour out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it."

This is not perhaps the highest motive for giving to God. Paul strikes a higher note when he says, "I beseech you by the mercies of God that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice unto God." Our gifts to Him should be thankofferings not investments. All the same, if a man gives nothing to God, it means that God is nothing to him. There are many parasites of the Church to-day who use it merely as a social convenience, to baptize them, to marry them and to bury them. It is a mean man's religion and the religion it produces will be just as mean. Only what we make a sacrifice for is worth the having.

But it is not merely their niggardliness that the prophet attacks. He attacks them for their social corruptions. And especially he arraigns them for *their transgression of the sacred covenant of marriage*. Many of them were putting away "for

any cause," and marrying in their place the heathen women of the land. Some of these were rich, daughters of wealthy land-owners who had received from the Chaldæans the property of the exiled Jews. In order to get back their own many of these exiles had now married their usurpers' children, and thus those poor deserted wives were left to perish. They were "covering the Altar with their tears" so that the Lord could not "regard" it any more.

The prophet's attitude to this evil is uncompromising. Nowhere in the Old Testament do we see a nearer approach to Jesus Christ. "The God of Israel saith, I hate divorce," is his message to such adulterers. He who "puts asunder what God hath joined together," breaks the most solemn of all covenants and "dealeth treacherously with the wife of his youth."

Would that these solemn words were more listened to in many quarters to-day! In many of the countries of Europe, and most of all in America, the marriage bond is being treated as a mere human contract which can be loosed by the legislature on the most flimsy pretexts. Such legislation is but the legalizing of adultery, and can only bring in its train misery to the individual and ruin to the State.

III. But though Malachi is something of a

pessimist in regard to the present, he is by no means a hopeless pessimist.

He looks forward to a better day when a Sun of Righteousness will arise and usher in a moral and spiritual revival in which God would again gather up His own and set them "as jewels" in His crown.

Who is this Sun of Righteousness? He is, as we learn from the opening verses of the third chapter, none other than the Messiah, the Messenger of the New Covenant. We learn that first of all from the mention Malachi makes of his Forerunner. "Behold, I will send My messenger before Me, and he shall prepare the way before Me." The language is the same as the Evangelical prophet employs when he says of the Forerunner of the Messiah: "A voice crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Make His paths straight." Malachi, therefore, is thinking the same thoughts as his greater predecessor. A great Messiah is to come, "the Lord whom ye seek," who is suddenly to come to His Temple. But before Him there shall come another, His forerunner, to prepare the way of the Lord.

In the closing verses of his prophecy, Malachi describes this Forerunner as a second Elijah who is "to turn the heart of the fathers to their

children and the heart of the children to their fathers." By these striking words he indicates that there was when he spoke a great schism between the old and the new generation. The new generation probably despised their fathers. Like many a Jew to-day they had practically forsaken the God of their fathers. The only Deity they worshipped was Mammon, the worship of wealth and luxury. But when the second Elijah came the altar of Mammon would be thrown down. A revival of true religion would permeate the whole nation, uniting young and old in a common faith.

Such a schism is not unknown in our own age. In a time of intellectual movement like the present there is apt to be a lack of sympathy between the religious and moral ideals of the old and the young. We see an example of it in such a book as Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son*. Though the father, in that frank and painful human document, was kind in heart he was narrow in opinion. As the child grew to manhood, his views changed with the changing years. The father grew narrower: the son grew broader. A breach occurred one night when, at the Plymouth Brethren's meeting which they attended, a member got up and denounced Shakespeare as a godless play-actor now enduring the tortures of the lost. An

open rupture was the result and the son closes the sad record with the words, "After long experience, I have surely the right to protest against the view that Evangelicalism is a valuable adjunct of human life. It invents virtues which are cruel and sins which do not exist. It darkens the heavens of innocent joys with a futile remorse."

How is such a clashing of the generations to be met? Only by a new and larger truth taking possession of the soul and uniting them in a higher unity. This new truth is Christ—Christ broadly and intelligently preached as the wisdom of God and the righteousness of God. In Him the old and new find their harmony in a conception of God in which righteousness and peace kiss mutually.

This is the conception which Malachi dimly foreshadows when he says, "Unto you that fear My name shall the Sun of Righteousness arise with healing in His wings." Christ is here described as the Sun of Righteousness. As the sun is the grandest object in nature, so in Christ we have the noblest exhibition of the righteousness of the Old Covenant that human history was ever to know. In His spotless life and exalted teaching we see the very effulgence of the Divine Glory.

But Christ is far more than Righteousness, He is love as well. He comes with "healing in His

wings." The sun does not always do so. Sometimes his beams smite like swords on the weary traveller as he plods his way across the desert. It is this aspect of His character that Malachi has chiefly in his mind in his first description of the Lord coming to His Temple. It is rather the Christ of Michelangelo's Last Judgment than the tender gracious Man of Sorrows such as we see in the evangelical prophet.

Such a Christ is out of fashion to-day; but it ought never to be forgotten that it represents a real side of the work of Jesus in His day. In His attitude to the scribes and Pharisees, in His doctrine of Judgment, in His cleansing of the Temple, we see the Sun of Righteousness in the sterner aspect of His work.

But while Malachi thus emphasizes "the day of the Lord" as a day of doom to all that "do wickedly," he closes with a more gracious picture. "To you that fear My name" He shall "arise with healing in His wings." As light is being more and more recognized to-day as a great healer of disease, so it is fitting that Malachi should close the prophetic Canon of the Old Testament with this description of Christ as the Great Healer. For that is just what He came to do. He came to heal the greatest of all diseases, the disease of Sin. This is the root meaning of the word Saviour. It

means a Healer. And it is this thought which lies at the root of the great description of His Mission in John's Gospel: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." He was the true Brazen Serpent who came to give life to the dying, for "in Him was the life, and the life was the light of men."

But it is only to those that "fear" His name that the Son of Righteousness thus arises with "healing in His wings." In other words, we must throw open the shutters of our house of life to His influence; we must allow Him to enter our hearts with the radiance of His Love if this result is to be attained. Otherwise our day of grace will pass away unrealized and—it is Malachi's closing word—when He next arises, it will be "to smite the earth with a curse."

# XXI

## JOEL: THE PROPHET OF THE SPIRIT

And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh.—JOEL ii. 28.

THESE are the most notable words of Joel. They owe their pre-eminence, I need hardly say, to the fact that Peter quotes them in his famous defence of his fellow-Christians on the day of Pentecost. They had been accused of drunkenness; a good sign in a way. It were well if there were more likelihood of such a charge being levelled against some churches to-day. Many of them look as if their worshippers had drunk a cup of opium instead of "new wine."

Joel himself lived in such an age of spiritual depression. It is difficult to place him. The older critics made him on good grounds one of the oldest of the prophets; but it is now generally agreed that these same grounds may with more credibility be adduced for placing him among the very latest. This, at all events, is the view we have been led, with some hesitation, to adopt,

namely that Joel lived in post-exilic times about the age of Ezra and Nehemiah. The temple had been rebuilt, but many of the exiles were still scattered abroad and some of them were grinding as slaves in the far-distant cities of Greece.

The occasion of his prophecy was a terrible calamity which had in Joel's day befallen the nation. A plague of locusts almost unexampled for magnitude had devastated the land. Joel's description of this insect-invasion is one of the finest things in Old Testament poetry. He was an artist as well as a prophet, and he paints before us these "hosts of famine" in vivid and arresting colours.

"Before them the land lies like an Eden paradise;
Behind them it is a desolate desert; for nothing escapes them.
They look like horses, they run like war horses.
As chariots rattle, they leap on the hilltops,
Like flames that crackle consuming the straw
Like a vast army in battle array.
Hearts are in anguish before them; all faces turn pale.
They charge like warriors, they advance like fighters
Each on his own track; no tangling of paths,
None pushes his fellow, each follows his own line,
They burst through weapons, unbroken
They rush on the city, run over the walls.
They climb into the city, and enter in at the windows like thieves."[1]

Under this fresh calamity the heart of the

[1] chap. ii. 3–9 (Moffatt's Translation).

nation seems to have been broken. It was the last straw. "Alas for the day!" they cry. "The day of the Lord is at hand, and as a destruction from the Almighty shall it come" (i. 15).

Joel rebukes this unbelieving despair. He "blows the trumpet" in Zion and summons them to a fast of solemn repentance. "Cast off your sins," he cries, specially mentioning among them drunkenness and hypocrisy. "Rend your hearts," he says in an exquisite contrast. "Rend your hearts, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God" (ii. 13).

Let Judah do this sincerely and God will yet be gracious unto her. Her material wealth will be given back. "God will restore to you the years which the locust hath eaten." The threshing-floors will be filled again with corn and the vats shall overflow with new wine. And then, then at the end of all this commercial revival there will come what is better far, a spiritual revival. "And it shall come to pass that after those days I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh."

It has been noted as a curious feature of this revival that it is to come *after* the material one. We should naturally have expected "first the spiritual and then afterwards that which is natural." But doubtless, as Sir G. A. Smith has pointed out, the physical blessings come first,

because they are a proof that God has relented from His anger and listened to their prayers. "In plenteous rains and full harvests God sets His seal to man's penitence. Rain and harvest are not merely physical blessings but religious sacraments, signs that God has again returned to His people. This has to be made clear before there can be any talk of further blessing. . . . But we may go further and assert that for Joel's anticipation of the baptism of the Spirit there is an ethical reason and one permanently valid in history. A certain degree of prosperity and even of comfort is an indispensable condition of that universal and lavish exercise of the religious faculties which Joel pictures under the pouring forth of God's Spirit. The history of prophecy furnishes proofs of this. Nor has it been otherwise in Christianity. An acute historian observes that every religious revival in England has happened upon a basis of comparative prosperity" (G. Adam Smith, D.D., *Book of the Twelve Prophets*).

History does not tell us whether this prophecy was ever literally fulfilled. It may have partially been so in the age of the Maccabees, when there was a great revival of religious patriotism and the youth of the land was gloriously engaged under the noble Judas in the resuscitation of Judah's

ancient institutions. But no prophecy is of private interpretation and beyond question the true fulfilment of these great words was found in those mighty happenings through which Peter and his fellow-disciples had been passing in those great days which began with the Crucifixion and had their glorious consummation in Pentecost.

And it is as such that Joel's words have an eternal meaning and a special fitness for us also. We too live in an age of depression both national and spiritual. The aftermath of the War has been long and weary. The nation groans under a twin burden of taxation and unemployment. Legislation, wise and not panicky legislation, can no doubt do much and no doubt is doing much to ease the burden. But what we need most of all, as Mr. Baldwin said not long ago, is a spiritual revival, a revival of appreciation of the spiritual values. If this were come we should see the tide of prosperity return, not merely to the Church but to the nation; for, Carlyle has truly said: "Ages of doubt are ages of weakness, but strong ages are those of faith."[1]

This brings us to note the special features promised by Joel in the Descent of the Holy Spirit. There is to be a revival in three directions, a

[1] Essay on *Characteristics*.

Revival of *Life*, a Revival of *Love* and a Revival of *Power*.

(1) There is first of all to be a Revival of *Life*.

"I will *pour out* My Spirit," says Joel, "upon all flesh."

"I will pour out My Spirit," says Joel. The figure made use of is that of water, and he recurs to it again when he says in the next chapter, "A fountain shall come forth of the house of the Lord and shall water the valley of Shittim."

Water is the great vivifier of the East. Where the sun is so fierce in its burning rays water becomes an absolute necessity of life, and it is in this sense Joel speaks of the Holy Spirit here. He comes to give life. It is so that our Lord also speaks of the result of His advent when on the last "great day" of the feast He cried saying: "If any man thirst let him come unto Me and drink. He that believeth on Me, as the Scripture hath said, out of his body shall flow rivers of living water; but this spake He of the Spirit."

This life is to invade every part of the mental life, not merely the Will but the Imagination as well. "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy." There will be no lack of candidates for the Holy Ministry then. "Your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions." Too often the old are out of sympathy with the

young, especially in religious things. But when the great revival comes, it will sweep every dividing mark away. "The young man's vision and the old man's dream" will melt into each like dissolving views. Youth and age will be united in one common enthusiasm.

Is not this what we need to-day? I once read a book with the curious title of *The Feet of the Young Men*. It is largely a book of political essays of a not very sympathetic kind. But its title arrested me. It is taken, of course, from St. Peter's words in the Acts of the Apostles. "The feet of the young men are at the door and shall carry thee forth." The feet of the young men were "at the door" of the early Church as they are at the door of every institution that is living to-day. Are they at the door of the Church to-day? I would not like to take up a too pessimistic attitude on this question, as I think of the many noble types of youth pouring out of many a living Church to-day. But still, as we think of the crowded Bible Classes and Fellowship meetings and Theological Colleges of other days and contrast them with what we see to-day we have reason to pray for that fresh outpouring of the Divine life which made Peter say "The young men are at the door" ready and eager to go forth in the quest of Christ, on the enterprise of God.

(2) Then further Joel teaches us here that the outpouring of God's spirit will mean a Revival of *Love*.

"I will pour out My Spirit upon *all* flesh." Emphasize the word "*all*." Joel is a great Democrat of the Spirit. He is not exclusive, shutting out the heathen nations from the Divine blessing. "Whosoever," he cries, "shall call on the name of the Lord shall be delivered." There is no race barrier with him. So broadly Catholic is he that even the very slaves are to share in the blessing. "And also," he says, "upon the servants" (i.e. the slaves) "and upon the hand-maids" (i.e. the bond-maidens) "will I pour out My Spirit." [1]

It was a noble vision and it was nobly realized when Paul preached a Christ that was free to Jew and Greek and male and female, bond

[1] It may be urged that in the third chapter of his prophecy Joel takes up a much narrower and more exclusive attitude to the heathen. This is true and therefore we are inclined to take the view of Rothstein, that the third chapter is an apocalyptic expansion of the closing verses of the second one and comes from a later hand. But in any case it is quite unwarrantable to interpret the breadth of Joel's prophecy of the Spirit by the narrowness of his prophecy of judgment and to say with Jordan (*Prophetic Ideals*, p. 331) that by "all flesh" Joel means "all Jewish flesh." That would be a caricature of his message. The whole trend of his prophecy of the Spirit is universalism in its broadest and noblest sense.

and free, because "ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

Race-hatred is one of the greatest world problems to-day. The Rise of Nationalism may be traced in every part of the world, and it is big with difficulties and dangers in the future. "The question of colour" is one of the most difficult questions which the League of Nations will have to solve if it is to prevent the world being drenched in a fresh flood of human blood. And there is only One who can solve it. Only by the Spirit of Christ descending with His universal love on the councils and diplomacies of the nations will the world be saved from a fresh Armageddon.

(3) Last of all there is to come a fresh Baptism of Power.

"And it shall come to pass that whosoever shall call upon the Lord shall be delivered; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem shall be deliverance, as the Lord hath said, and among the remnant whom the Lord shall call."

Peter, in quoting these words, translates "delivered" as "saved." "Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved." He is right in so doing for, as the context shows, it is no mere material deliverance which the prophet here contemplates. It is the great and notable day of

the Lord when all nations shall be judged according to their works.

That day will be for some a dark and dreadful day, but it will have no terrors for those on whom the Divine Spirit has come. They will have been provided a way of escape. Their eyes will be opened to see in Christ a great Deliverer, who shall lead them into a Zion of perfect security. Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved, "for Sion hill shall hold those who escape as the Lord has declared and the fugitives whom the Eternal calls shall be inside Jerusalem" (iii. 32, Moffatt's Translation).

This was the great gift which our Lord promised to His Church at Pentecost—the gift of power, power to conquer sin, power to overcome the world, power to face a hostile environment before which they were a very feeble remnant. And this power we know came. There is nothing more wonderful in history than the new power which was poured forth on the trembling disciples on "that great and notable day of the Lord." It is one of the miracles of history and can only be explained on the basis of a supernatural gift. Joel himself would have been amazed had he seen how the little company of humble fishermen were transformed into an army

of heroes who went forth to conquer the world in the "power of the Lamb."

To close, what message has this prophecy for us to-day? Surely it reminds us afresh of the need of more dependence on the Holy Spirit, if the Church is to recapture the power by which she can conquer a world which to-day is as essentially hostile to the spiritual life as it was in the days of her first early triumphs. What we need more than anything to-day is to lay to heart the words of another prophet, "Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord." The great revivals of the Church have always been characterized by a sense of dependence on the power of the Spirit, and its most successful winners of souls have been men who could say with all their hearts, "I believe in the Holy Ghost."

A Danish preacher declared not long ago that this was the case with the great Evangelical Revival which had changed the face of that country a generation before. Its leader was a man who believed most of all in this, *that God saves and that He alone saves.* He told of a tipsy man who had met him one night in Copenhagen and greeted him with the remark: "Dr. ——, you saved me ten years ago!" "Ah, yes," was the reply, "it is well seen that it was *I* saved you. If

God had done the work, He would have done it much better."

It is under the Spirit's power alone that men shall call upon the name of the Lord with saving results. And how then is this power to be won? Joel points the way of repentance and prayer when he says, "Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly. Gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children."

Prayer, universal prayer, including the whole nation, even the children—that was the first condition of spiritual power. It was the same at Pentecost. "Tarry ye in Jerusalem until ye be endued with power from on high." And so they tarried, tarried for ten days in prayer and supplication, until the outpouring came.

But, as I have said elsewhere,[1] there must be more than prayer. There must be repentance as well. "Rend your hearts, and not your garments," says Joel in unforgettable words. It is not the outward ceremonial that brings God into our lives. It is the rent heart, the broken spirit, the cleansed soul. The wire must be isolated before the Divine electricity can pass along with its message of power into the life. We must prepare our heart to seek the Lord, and having done

[1] p. 243.

so seek Him with *all* our heart. Then this ancient promise will be fulfilled in our experience: "Ye shall know that I am in the midst of Israel . . . and My people shall never be ashamed."

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